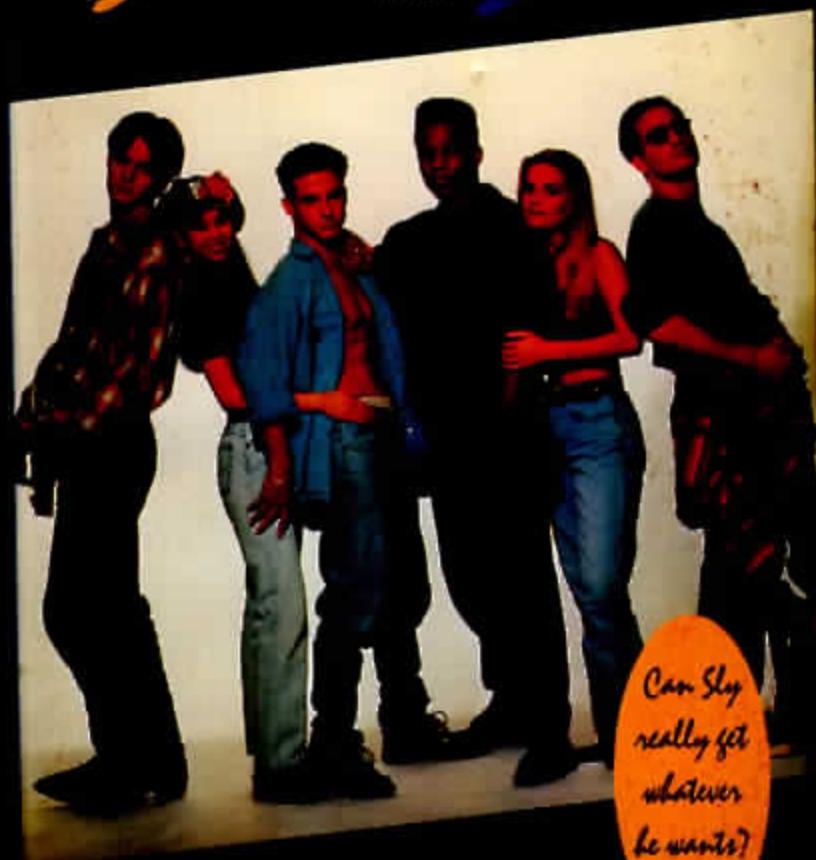




Dreamers and Schemers



Can Sly
really get
whatever
he wants?

by Chelsea Brooks

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*To all the kids out there who
have schemed for a dream*

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Chapter 1

"**O**utrageous!" Sly Winkle exclaimed as he clapped enthusiastically. California Dreams, the band he managed, was having its regular Sunday afternoon practice session. They had just finished playing "Part of My Heart," one of their hottest numbers.

Sly grinned his trademark crooked grin. "You guys have never sounded better!"

"Thank you, thank you," Tony Wicks, the band's drummer, said, laying down his sticks. "No applause, just throw money." He pretended to style his curly black hair.

"I think that's a good way to end the practice," Matt Garrison said, setting his guitar down on its stand. Matt was the Dreams' rhythm guitarist and chief songwriter, and it was in his family's garage

that the group practiced whenever they got the chance.

"Definitely," Tiffani Smith agreed, lifting her bass guitar over her head, making sure the strap didn't get caught in her long blond hair. "But if we keep this up, people will really start hiring us to perform!" she added.

"So why haven't they already?" Samantha Woo asked from her position behind the keyboard. Sam always seemed to ask the most pertinent questions. Of course, she talked so much and asked so many questions that some of them were bound to be pertinent. "That's what I'd like to know. *Sly . . .*"

"Yeah, Mr. Manager," Jake Summers, the Dreams' lead guitarist, chimed in. With his rugged good looks and his Mr. Cool, leather-jacketed toughness, Jake was irresistible to girls. And guys who knew what was good for them didn't argue with him, either. "When's our next gig?"

"You heard the man," Tony said. "The public demands, we've got to deliver. And since you're our manager, I figure that makes you the delivery boy."

"Easy, easy," Sly said, raising both hands protectively. "You're hurting my funny bone, Wicks."

"Seriously, Winkle," Jake said. "What's happening on the progress front? We wanna play!"

"Yeah, Sly," Samantha added. "Performing at the party after the school play was fun, but it was kind of like eating one potato chip, you know?"

"All right, all right," Sly said, getting up and puffing out his chest. "Since you're all so impatient, I might as well break the good news right here and now."

"Good news?" Matt repeated. "What good news?"

"Yeah, what good news?" Tiffani asked.

"I swear, you're like a bunch of little children," Sly said, shaking his head condescendingly. "I was going to tell you after I had all the final details worked out, but . . ."

"You mean, this good news is only a maybe?" Tony asked. "Is that what you're saying, Sylvester?"

Sly cleared his throat. "Tony, my man . . ."

"I'm not your man, my man," Tony corrected him. "Not unless we're talking about a *real* gig."

"It's real, all right," Sly insisted.

"So what is it?" Jake asked impatiently.

"The South Coast Arts Festival," Sly told them with a conspiratorial wink. "Ever hear of it?"

"Are you kidding?" Matt asked. "That's the biggest event of the whole year around here!" He turned to Sam. "Every year they hold the arts festival in a different town, and they book dozens of bands. Last year we didn't have enough experience to get hired. But we've performed a lot since then."

Sam's almond-shaped eyes widened eagerly. She had come over from Hong Kong as an exchange student just a couple of months ago and was staying

with the Garrison family while their daughter Jenny was in Rome on a music scholarship. Jenny had been part of the Dreams from the beginning, but Sam had filled in really well.

"So, Winkle," Jake said. "You actually got us a gig playing there?"

"It's like I told you, Jake," Sly replied. "It's just a matter of dotting the i's and crossing the t's."

And one other thing, Sly thought to himself, namely, contacting the festival's promoters to let them know a band named California Dreams even exists. But of course Sly left that part out. There was no sense in worrying the band members with all the little details.

"It's in the bag," Sly added.

"What makes you think so?" Tiffani asked.

"Look, it's simple," Sly insisted. "They're holding the festival in Redondo Beach this year, right?"

"Right," Tony agreed. "So?"

"So, every year they go heavy on hometown talent—and this year, that's us! I mean, are we or are we not the hottest band in Redondo Beach?"

"Well," Matt said tentatively, brushing his brown hair off his forehead. "I'd say we're definitely the hottest band at Pacific Coast High. . . ."

"Matthew, I'm surprised at you!" Sly said, furrowing his brow in exaggerated concern. "Where's your self-confidence? Where's your can-do spirit?" He turned to the rest of the band members. "Mark

my words, people: There is nothing a person can't do when he's made his mind up to do something. I repeat—this gig is ours."

"Well, okay, Sylvester," Tony said, raising his eyebrows doubtfully. "If you say so."

"Yeah," Jake agreed. "And since you're so sure, Winkle, I'd say this calls for a celebration. How about we all go down to Sharkey's and have a round of chocolate shakes—on Sly?"

"Wha—on me??" Sly gasped. "Wait a second!"

"But Winkle," Jake said, feigning confusion. "I thought you said this gig was in the bag."

"It is! I mean—oh, okay," Sly said, heaving a sigh of resignation.

"Relax, Sly," Jake said, putting a comforting arm around Sly's shoulder. "We'll pay you back with our money from the gig—which, like you said, is in the bag. Right?"

Sly flashed Jake a sickly smile. "Right. You can count on it," he said, though he was starting to wish he'd never opened his big mouth in the first place. Now he was going to have to make good on his promise to get the gig. Not to mention buy everyone shakes!

* * *

"Ah, Wicks! I've been looking for you!"

Tony looked over his shoulder as he and the other band members walked into Sharkey's, and saw the chubby figure of his boss hovering over him.

Tony worked part-time at Sharkey's Beachside Burger Shack after school. It was a good job, although he would rather have been playing his drums. But he needed the money, and at Sharkey's the tips added up pretty quickly. After all, the place was the numero uno hangout for the kids from Pacific Coast High School.

"Yeah, Sharkey, what can I do for you?" Tony asked.

"Hi, you guys," Sharkey briefly greeted the Dreams. "Listen, Tony, I want you to do me a favor."

"You know me, Sharkey," Tony said. "Always willing to do a favor for my favorite boss."

"Yeah, yeah, right," Sharkey said with a quick nod. "Listen, my sister and my brother-in-law just moved to town with their two kids. Twins—a boy and a girl."

"Great," Tony said, smiling and nodding. "And?"

"Well, my nephew, Stu, is coming to work for me here, starting tomorrow. And I want you to break the kid in. You know, show him the ropes."

"Sure thing, boss," Tony said. "Be happy to."

"Good," Sharkey said. "Look, he's in the kitchen now—lemme bring him out here so he can meet you and the gang. He's gonna be starting school at PCHS tomorrow."

Sharkey hustled his bulky frame back to the kitchen and returned a few moments later with a tall, gangly, red-headed kid who seemed to trip over

his own feet every few steps he took.

"This is my nephew, Stu Malone," Sharkey said. "Stu, say hello to California Dreams. They're a pretty good band, if you like loud rock music."

Stu did as he was told, flashing the Dreams a smile. "Hi," he said. "I'm Stu. Who are you? Heh-heh—that's a rhyme!"

The Dreams flashed each other quick oh-boy glances before introducing themselves to Sharkey's nephew. "Stu's gonna be a classmate of yours," Sharkey told them. "So's his twin sister, Markie. She's a professional model, y'know."

"Is that right?" Sly asked, trying to repress a smirk. "Who do you have for homeroom, Stu?"

"Ms. McAllister," Stu said. "And so does my sister. Yuck."

"Hey, that's my homeroom, too," Sly said, glad that none of the seats next to him in class were presently vacant. The last thing he needed was this clown trying to make friends with him.

"Well, be seeing you all!" Stu said, following his uncle back into the kitchen.

"Whoa." Sly couldn't repress a loud guffaw. "What a geek!"

"Oh, come on, now, Sly," Tiffani scolded him. "You just met the guy. He might be very nice once you get to know him." Besides being a knockout, Tiffani had a heart of gold. She was always giving people the benefit of the doubt.

Sly burst out laughing again. "Boy, I'll bet his sister is a real winner, too. A professional model, can you believe it? Must be what they call a 'character' model."

Samantha shrugged. "You never know, Sly," she said. "Maybe Markie's really good-looking."

"Come on, Sam," Sly replied, rolling his eyes skeptically. "She's his twin. How good-looking can she be?"

"Sly, you really shouldn't judge people before you know them," Matt pointed out.

"Yeah, right," Sly said. "I can't wait to meet this chick. Judging by her twin brother, I'll bet she's a babe-and-a-half."

"Looks aren't everything, Wimple," Jake said. "If they were, you'd be out of luck."

"Very funny, Jake," Sly shot back, not at all offended. He might not be the magnet for babes that Jake was, but with his wavy brown hair, devastating brown eyes, and the irresistible cleft in his chin, Sly knew that he was almost as attractive to women as he was to himself.

"But you know," he told Jake, "you do have a point. Looks, brains, and personality aren't everything. Yes, I can't wait to meet good old Markie Malone. I'm sure I'm going to be seriously impressed—NOT!"

* * *

On Monday morning Sly walked into his homeroom

to find every guy in the class clustered in the back. Through the crowd he could see Stu Malone's curly carottop. So, Sly thought, laughing to himself. *All the guys are having their fun with the new dweeb.*

And there was another carottop, too, slightly shorter than Stu's. Must be his twin sister, Markie—two nerds for the price of one.

The bell rang, and Ms. McAllister stepped into the room. "All right, class," she said. "I'm glad to see you're all making our new arrivals feel welcome, but we've got lots of work to do. Please take your seats."

The crowd parted slowly, and there, standing next to her brother, was the most incredible, stupendous, outrageous, gnarly, radical, excellent-looking girl Sly had ever laid eyes on! With thick, wavy red hair, huge green eyes, and a perfect smile, she was seriously something to look at.

"I thought you two were twins," Sly whispered to Stu as he passed on his way to an empty seat near the front of the class.

"We are," Stu replied. "Fraternal twins. We're not at all alike."

"No, duh," Sly agreed, swallowing hard as he watched Markie take her seat at the far side of the room. Three guys surrounded her, making sure she got seated okay. *It's pathetic. They're practically slobbering all over themselves*, Sly thought, wiping his mouth.

"Can we begin?" Ms. McAllister asked.

The class finally got itself together enough to pay attention—all except Sly, that is. For the entire fifteen minutes of homeroom, he never once took his eyes off Markie Malone.

A couple of times she caught him looking at her, and once she even giggled. Sly felt himself actually blushing—a first! He'd never gone red over someone before.

When the bell rang, students gathered their things together and headed off to their first-period classes. As Sly made his way toward the door, his eyes were glued to Markie's back. And one thought repeated itself over and over in his brain:

She will be mine. Oh yes, she will be mine.

Chapter 2

"Jasmine! How're you doing, baby?" Tony strolled over to his girlfriend as she collected some things from her locker. The school day was over, and Tony had to hustle on over to Sharkey's. But he always had some time for Jasmine. With her smooth, chocolate-colored skin, lustrous dark hair, and huge brown eyes, Jasmine was a real looker. But she also had a terrific personality and was a lot of fun to hang out with. Tony felt lucky to have her for a girlfriend.

"I'm doing all right, Tony," Jasmine said, giving him a smooch. "Of course, if you and I spent a little more time together, you'd know how I was without having to ask."

"Yeah," Tony said apologetically. "But I've got to work at Sharkey's, and practice with the Dreams."

"I know, Tony," Jasmine said with a sigh. "I

suppose you don't have time to walk me home now, either?"

"Mmm, I'd love to, Jasmine, but Sharkey's waiting on me," Tony said. "Soon, though, okay? I'm gonna clear some time real soon, and you and I are gonna fly to the moon!"

"I love poetry," Jasmine said with a dreamy smile. "Too bad it's poetry in motion."

"Yeah," Tony agreed, hoisting his books over his shoulder and sighing. "I've got to go make some money, Jasmine. But I'll see you later." Giving her another quick kiss, Tony ran outside and headed down the street.

As he walked to Sharkey's, Tony wished he had a ton of money. He didn't mind working, but between school, his job, and band practice, he didn't have time for anything else! Today, in fact, he was missing a rehearsal. Usually the Dreams were able to practice around his schedule, but this week they'd decided to hold a rehearsal without him. And Tony had to keep working so he could take Jasmine out for a nice dinner once in a while.

There were lots of kids whose parents gave them all the money they needed. Yeah, it seemed like there was a lot of green stuff floating around. *Too bad none of it ever lands on me*, Tony mused.

Tony was still dreaming about finding a hundred-dollar bill in the street when he passed Iggy's Music Store, the place where he and all the Dreams

got their supplies. Iggy had just fixed Tony's drum set a few weeks ago. Of course, now it needed fixing again. That's how it was when you were playing on drums that were left over from the Middle Ages.

Iggy was in the window now, putting in a new display. Iggy was an aging hippie. He had a salt-and-pepper ponytail and granny glasses, and wore tie-dye shirts and peace sign necklaces. Iggy had been wearing these fashions so long that they'd come back in style, but Iggy didn't care whether he was fashionable or not—all he cared about was his music.

He waved to Tony now before turning his attention back to what he was doing. Tony came closer to the window, seeing for the first time that it was a drum set Iggy was putting together for display.

And what a drum set! Pearl drums, gleaming gray and silver, with all the trimmings. *A set like that probably does everything but play itself*, Tony thought longingly. Before he knew it, Tony had entered the store and was climbing up into the window display area with Iggy.

"Hey, man!" Iggy greeted him. "Groovy drum set, huh?"

"Iggy," Tony said, "nobody says 'groovy' anymore. And yeah, it's a groovy drum set, all right."

"You're drooling, bro," Iggy said.

"Yeah, I hear you," Tony said with a laugh. "I always drool when I see a beautiful set of drums. Now this one, this one's got my name written on it."

"Your name's Pearl?" Iggy joked.

"Seriously," Tony said, putting a hand on Iggy's shoulder. "These skins are bodacious. Just the kind I've been dreaming about. Iggy, what would you say to a trade-in?"

"Forget it, Tony," Iggy said, shaking his head. "Even though you're my friend, I'm in business to make money, not to do favors. Your old drum set isn't worth two cents. And anyway, this set is totally out of your league."

"Out of my league?" Tony repeated in disbelief. "Gimme those sticks, man! I'll show you what league I'm in!" Grabbing the drumsticks from Iggy's hand, Tony got behind the drum set and whipped out a righteous riff.

"Peace, man," Iggy said when Tony was done. "I didn't mean to disparage your talent. I was just talking about bread. These drums cost a pile of money."

"How much?" Tony asked. "I've got some money saved up, Iggy. I can pay."

"Six hundred," Iggy told him. "And that's the rock-bottom price, so don't try to bargain it down."

"S-s-six h-h-hundred?" Tony stammered. He had never had that much money in his entire life! "You've got to be kidding me!"

"You wish!" Iggy shot back. "Still want 'em?"

"Yeah, man," Tony said, suddenly feeling miserable.

"You got six hundred?"

"I, uh . . . I'll get it," Tony said, trying to sound convincing.

"I can't hold them for you," Iggy said apologetically. "You understand? If somebody comes in here and wants them, I've got to sell them. It's called capitalism. I'm against it, myself, but a guy's gotta live."

"Yeah, dude, I hear you," Tony mumbled, getting down from the window display. "Later, Iggy."

"Hey, how's Tiffani?" Iggy asked.

"She's all right," Tony told him.

"What a great chick," Iggy said with a sigh. "Give her my regards, okay? Tell her Iggy says hi."

"Sure," Tony said. "I'll do that."

He walked off toward Sharkey's, quickening his pace. He needed six hundred dollars, and he needed it fast! But where was he going to get that kind of money? It seemed impossible!

Then Tony remembered something Sly had said the day before, when he was telling them about the gig at the South Coast Arts Festival. He'd said that if a person really sets his mind to something, nothing can keep him from getting what he wants.

Right then and there, Tony promised himself that those Pearl drums would be his. And the only way Tony could think of to make more money was to work longer hours at Sharkey's.

Sure, it would mean he'd have less time to practice with the Dreams for awhile. And less time

for Jasmine, too. But in the end, it would be worth it. He'd have a set of drums that would make the Dreams sound even better than before!

And as for Jasmine, she'd just have to understand. Tony thought Jasmine was top-notch, but music was his number one passion. Jasmine would have to wait. He'd make it up to her, someday.

For now, the answer was spelled S-h-a-r-k-e-y-s. And when he glanced at the clock in the window of the bank, Tony could see that he was already ten minutes late! Full of hope and inspiration, Tony broke into a run. He was going to work so hard that Sharkey would beg him to take on more hours!

* * *

"Stu, come on, dude. The girl's your sister. You must know *something* about her!" Sly was trailing Stu Malone down the boulevard as they walked toward Sharkey's after school.

"She's totally stuck up," Stu said. "How many times do I have to tell you that? You should just forget about her."

Sly shook his head in disgust. This dweeb had no idea how incredibly lucky he was to spend his entire life under the same roof as Markie!

Sly grabbed Stu by the lapels. "Stu, old pal, old buddy. Did I or did I not show you the ropes at school today?"

"Well . . ." Stu didn't seem so sure.

"Am I or am I not the first and only friend you've made so far in Redondo Beach?"

"Uhhh . . ." Stu shrugged, confused. "You are? I mean, we are? Friends?"

"Of course!" Sly said, clapping him on the back. "Did I or did I not point out and give you the names of every single babe we passed in the halls today?"

"You didn't give me their phone numbers," Stu grumbled.

"All in good time, old buddy," Sly said, putting a guiding arm over Stu's shoulder. "Now, what were we talking about? Oh yes—your sister."

"Oh no," Stu moaned as they entered Sharkey's, passing under the sculpture of a huge shark taking a bite out of a surfboard that adorned the doorway. "Here we go again."

"Come on, Stu—focus!" Sly commanded. "What kind of guys does she like? In all these years you must have observed *something*!"

"I try to ignore her," Stu said matter-of-factly. "I can't stand her, and she can't stand me. That's about all there is to it."

Sly groaned in frustration, but before he could say anything else, Sharkey's angry voice boomed from the direction of the kitchen.

"There you are!" Sharkey cried anxiously, rushing up to his nephew. "Your first day on the job, and already you're late."

"Oh," Stu said, giggling nervously. "Oops."

"And where's Wicks?" Sharkey asked, annoyed.
"He's supposed to break you in today!"

"Somebody call my name?" Tony asked, coming into the restaurant wearing a big smile.

"Wicks!" Sharkey yelled. "You were supposed to break my nephew, Stu, in today, remember? Where've you been?"

"I got, ah . . . held up!" Tony said, trying not to let on that he'd totally forgotten he was supposed to train Sharkey's nephew today. "Sorry, Sharkey—I'm ready now." He turned to Stu. "Come on," he said. "Let's get busy."

"Wait a minute!" Sly shouted, still holding on to Stu's other arm. "I'm in the middle of a conversation with this guy!"

"It can wait," Sharkey said, interposing his bulk between Stu and Sly. "He's on *my* time now."

Looking over Sharkey's shoulder, Sly gave Stu a pleading look and clasped his hands together as if in prayer.

"Try flattery," Stu called out as Tony dragged him off. "She loves it."

Flattery. Sly nodded, trying the idea on for size. It was a good place to start, he figured. And besides, with his irresistible good looks and charm, getting Markie to go out with him should be a breeze.

Suddenly, in walked the object of his thoughts, surrounded by three guys with adoring looks on their

faces. They walked Markie to her table and stood hovering over her.

Markie sent each of them off to get her something: a glass of water, a menu, some extra napkins. As soon as they were gone, she looked around the place, a bored expression on her face.

Sly didn't waste a second. Sliding into a seat across the table from her, he leaned forward on his elbows, looked her right in the eyes, and said, "It must be awful being so gorgeous. I mean, you always have guys hanging all over you."

Markie looked right back at him. "You mean the way you're doing right now?"

"Me?" Sly said, his voice cracking embarrassingly.

Markie rolled her gorgeous green eyes. "What is it with guys?" she asked, sighing. "You're all so focused on looks! As if that meant anything."

"Oh!" Sly exclaimed, realizing his error. "I know exactly what you mean!" He sat back up casually and said, "I hope you don't think *I'm* like the rest of them. I would never hang all over you. I have too much respect for your intelligence."

"What do you know about my intelligence?" Markie asked. "We've never even talked."

"The name's Sly Winkle," he told her, offering his hand.

Markie took it gingerly, looking a little skeptical. Sly held her grasp for a brief extra moment, giv-

ing her a knowing look that said, "I understand."

The three guys returned with the objects they'd been assigned to retrieve. Sly took the glass, the napkins, and the menu from their stunned hands and said, "The lady's with me. Get lost, okay? Thanks so much."

He gave them a flicker of a smile before turning back to Markie, ignoring them completely. After a brief hesitation, the three guys took off, grumbling among themselves.

"There," Sly said. "I've gotten rid of them for you."

"What makes you think I wanted to be rid of them?" Markie asked with a wry grin.

"I could just tell," Sly said. "I think I'm pretty good at reading people's inner thoughts."

"Is that right?" Markie asked. "Okay, tell me what I'm thinking now." She kept smirking at him.

Sly squinted his eyes and thought hard. "You're thinking, this guy is different from the others. This guy, I'd like to get to know better."

"You flatter yourself," Markie said, the grin disappearing.

"Really?" Sly asked, arching his eyebrows. "It was you I meant to flatter."

"Don't bother. I hate flattery," Markie said flatly. Sly blinked rapidly. "You hate flattery?"

"Uh-huh. It's all I ever hear."

"I believe it," Sly said.

"Flatterer." The wry grin was back. "Look,

whatever you've got in mind, I'm not interested, okay? I just came in here to get a bite to eat. If I wanted to sit with you, I would have sat with you."

Sly didn't know how to react. He felt stung, insulted. How could she have resisted his charms so effortlessly?

"If that's how you feel, okay," he said, getting up. "I respect your feelings. And I wasn't flattering you. You really *are* gorgeous and intelligent. I was just being factual."

There, he thought defiantly, as he turned his back on Markie Malone and walked toward the front door of the restaurant. *Let her think about that for a while!*

On his way out, he ran smack into Stu, who was juggling a tray full of sodas, trying not to spill them all over the floor. Behind him, Tony grimaced as he reached around and caught one large-sized glass that was already tipping over.

"Stu!" Sly said, blocking his way. "I thought you said she liked flattery!"

"Huh?"

"Markie!" Sly whispered angrily. "You said she liked being flattered!"

"I did?" Stu asked, trying to remember. Then he gave his signature shrug, which sent the contents of one glass spilling to the floor. Tony sank to his knees with a groan and began to mop up the spill.

"Wicks!" came Sharkey's bellow from the

kitchen door. "Why aren't you taking care of Stu?"

As Sharkey came over and began to light into Tony, Sly took the tray from the boss's hapless nephew, placed it on a nearby table, and grabbed Stu by his Sharkey's T-shirt.

"Why did you tell me Markie liked flattery?"

Sly demanded. "She hates it!"

"Really?" Stu asked. "Okay, so I was wrong. So what? How am I supposed to know what's inside her head?"

Sly let go of him, giving up with a frustrated sigh. He walked out of the restaurant, shaking his head in disbelief. How could a girl like Markie have a twin brother like Stu? That dweeb was clearly going to be no help at all, Sly realized. He'd have to come up with a battle plan on his own.

Outside, Sly ran into Jake, who was on his way in. "Hey, Sly," Jake greeted him. "How's it going with our gig?"

"Our gig?" Sly repeated, drawing a total blank.

"Yeah. You know, the 'sure thing'?" Jake reminded him.

"Oh yeah—that gig!" Sly said as it all came back to him. "Just fine, Jake. Just fine. See you later!"

Sly hustled off down the street before Jake could ask him any more questions. He'd totally forgotten about the South Coast Arts Festival. Sly made a mental note to make some phone calls about it—right after he figured out a way to get Markie Malone.

Chapter 3

"No, Stu, not like that. If you do it that way, it's gonna—arrgh! Too late." Tony wiped the sweat from his brow and bent over to retrieve the bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich Stu had just dropped onto the lap of a very surprised and annoyed customer.

"First it's the soda, now this!" the bald-headed patron complained. "I'm going to have a word with your boss, young man," he told Tony.

"But it's—never mind," Tony broke off, resigned. What was he going to do, blame it on Stu? Tell the guy it was the boss's nephew's fault, not his? That he was only trailing the new waiter to make sure he did his job right?

After all, when you came right down to it, Stu was Tony's responsibility—except that nothing Tony

could ever do was going to make a waiter out of Sharkey's bumbling relative.

"Please don't do that, sir!" Tony begged. "I, uh, I won't charge you for the meal, all right? And you don't have to leave a tip, either."

"I should say not," huffed the man, wiping a few stray spots of mayonnaise off his lap.

"I'll be right back with a fresh sandwich," Tony promised him.

"Let me know when you're coming this time," the man said. "So I can get out of the way."

Tony smiled his best whatever-you-say-sir smile and, grabbing Stu's arm, led him back to the kitchen, where he placed an order for another BLT.

Fishing in his pockets for enough money to cover the man's order, Tony said, "Stu, you've got to hold the tray with two hands, okay?"

"But my neck was itching; I had to scratch it," Stu explained.

"Man, sometimes you've got to wait to scratch an itch, understand?"

"Okay, I guess," Stu mumbled, scratching his neck.

Tony rolled his eyes and sighed. This kid was definitely from outer space. "Come on, I'll show you how a real waiter does it."

Grabbing two armfuls of food and drink, Tony twirled around, pushing open the kitchen doors with his backside, and proceeded to make a whirlwind

tour of the restaurant, depositing sodas here, fries there, shakes and burgers everywhere.

At each table, he'd say something clever and charming to the customers, making certain Sharkey was within earshot. He wanted to be sure to make a good impression on his boss.

"Here, let me take that for you," Tony said, grabbing a sandwich plate with a few scraps on it from a surprised girl.

"But—"

"No need to thank me," Tony said. "I'm here to serve you with a smile."

It wasn't the way he usually waited tables, but Tony knew that if he wanted extra hours, he had to get Sharkey in the right frame of mind by working extra hard.

"Now, let's see if that BLT is ready," Tony told Stu, leading him back into the kitchen.

"Boy, that was amazing, the way you did all that so fast!" Stu said, impressed. "I could never do that. How did you know that girl was finished with her sandwich?"

"Instinct," Tony told him. "I call it the Wicks touch. Besides, nobody eats those scraps of lettuce we put on the side of the plate. It's just for decoration."

"Wicks!" Sharkey's voice boomed out. "How's it going here? You and Stu getting along okay?"

Tony straightened up quickly. "Yeah, Sharkey."

he replied enthusiastically, giving Stu a little slap on the back. "He's doing just fine. Practice makes perfect. Right, my man?"

"Right!" Stu said, pausing in his scratching to pick up the BLT.

"Stu, do you think you're ready to handle an order on your own?" Tony asked. "I've got something I want to say to your uncle."

"Sure thing!" Stu said, grinning. Turning quickly, he almost ran smack into another waiter on his way out of the kitchen.

"Take it easy there, Stu!" Tony called out, wincing. "He's a little overeager," he added to Sharkey by way of an explanation.

"Yeah," Sharkey said, not really paying attention.

"So, Sharkey, I've been wanting to talk to you," Tony began.

"That's a coincidence, Wicks," Sharkey replied. "Because I've been wanting to talk to you, too."

"You have?" Tony asked.

"Yeah. But you go first," Sharkey offered.

"Oh no, that's okay," Tony responded politely. "You go ahead. I'll wait."

"Okay," Sharkey said with a shrug. "Listen, I just got a complaint from a young lady out there that you took her sandwich before she was finished with it."

"Uh . . . I did?" Tony asked, stunned. "Oh yeah! That! Sharkey, it sure looked like she was fin-

ished. And I was just trying to show Stu how you've got to work fast around here, and—"

"It doesn't matter," Sharkey said, waving him off. "Forget it." Cracking his knuckles, the way he always did when he was about to say something important, Sharkey launched into the real purpose of his speech.

"Tony, now that my nephew's gonna be working here, I'm a little overstuffed. You can see that, can't you?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess so," Tony said, not liking the way the conversation seemed to be going.

"I'm gonna have to let somebody go," Sharkey continued. "And unfortunately, that somebody is you."

"Me?! But—"

"I've been gettin' quite a few complaints from customers today," Sharkey added. "And you don't work that many hours, anyway."

"But—but—"

"Now, what was it you wanted to tell me?" Sharkey asked, wiping his hands on his apron.

Tony's jaw worked up and down, but nothing came out. Finally he said, "Uh, nothing, Sharkey. Nothing at all . . ." Removing his apron, Tony turned to go.

"You understand, don't you, Wicks? Business is business, and family is family."

"Sure, Sharkey. I understand."

"You can keep the Sharkey's T-shirt," his boss called after him. "And hey—if anybody quits, I'll call you."

"Sure, Sharkey," Tony said in a crushed voice. "See you around."

He walked out of the kitchen like a zombie and kept going until he was out in the street. Behind him, he could hear the bald-headed man screaming at Stu, who had obviously dumped the new BLT right where the old one had landed.

• • •

"Hey, Tony!" Matt looked up from his guitar in surprise as Tony walked into the garage where the Dreams were finishing up their practice session. "I thought you weren't coming today!"

"Yeah," Sam said. "Didn't you have to work this afternoon?"

"Yup," Tony said, letting out a deep breath and walking slowly toward his old drum set—the one he'd probably be playing for a long, long time.

"What happened, Tone?" Jake asked. "Did you get off early?"

"Yeah, I got off early," Tony replied, still feeling stung. "I got off early and permanently. Sharkey fired me."

"What?!" all the Dreams cried at once.

"But how could he do that?" Tiffani asked, her green eyes wide with concern.

"Easy," Tony told her. "He's the boss. He can fire anybody he wants."

"But why you, Tony?" Matt asked. "I thought Sharkey liked you."

"He had to make room for his nephew," Tony explained. "Somebody had to go, and he said that since I don't work very many hours anyway, he thought it should be me. The funny thing is that I was just about to ask him for extra hours."

"Oh, Tony," Tiffani said, coming over and putting an arm around his shoulders. "I'm really sorry."

"Me, too," Sam agreed, coming around to Tony's other side. "Maybe Sharkey will change his mind. I mean, he's got to realize you're the greatest waiter to ever work for him, right? And besides, without you, that place will never be the same! I mean, which of the other waiters keeps the customers laughing the way you do? And which of the other waiters—"

"Sam," Jake interrupted her. "Enough. Talking about it isn't going to make Tony feel any better."

"You got that right," Tony agreed. "Thanks anyway, Sam. You guys are great. But I really needed that job! See, I saw this totally fresh drum set in Iggy's window, and I was going to try and save up money to buy it. But I'll never get it now."

"Don't be silly, Tony!" Tiffani said encouragingly. "Of course you'll get those drums."

"I don't think so," Tony said, shaking his head

ruefully. "Iggy said he wasn't going to hold them for me. I don't have much time to get the money together. And how am I going to do it when I don't even have a job?"

"There are other jobs," Matt said.

"Yeah? Like what?" Tony asked.

"Uhhhh . . ." Matt searched his brain. "Well, I can't think of any off the top of my head, but I'm sure there are lots of things you could do to make money."

"Sure!" Tiffani agreed. "Besides, remember what Sly said the other day?"

"What did I say?" asked Sly, poking his head through the door. "Hi, everybody! Hi, Tony. Hey, what are you doing here?"

"He got fired," Tiffani explained. "And what you said was, 'There's nothing that can stop a person once he really puts his mind to something.'" Then she continued, "We're talking about Tony getting a new job."

Sly looked dubious. "Yeah, I said that," he acknowledged. "But I didn't mean just anyone. I meant a guy like me. I'm not so sure about Tony. Hey, dude, why bother to get another job, anyway? Enjoy your leisure time. Play more drums."

Tony shook his head in annoyance. "That's just it, Sylvester. These drums here only have a few more licks in them before they fall apart on me. I need a new set. And Iggy's got the set I want, only it's six hundred dollars."

"Oh. Well, forget it, then," Sly said dismissively. "You'll never get it, Tony. No offense, but the only way you're going to get your hands on that kind of money is if you find it in the street."

"That's what you think!" Tony shot back, suddenly feeling angry. "I'll show you, Sylvester. And I'll show Sharkey, too. I'm going to get a job and make that six hundred dollars before—before the South Coast Arts Festival gig!"

"Would you like to bet on it?" Sly asked, unable to suppress a smirk.

"Sure thing!" Tony responded, firmly shaking Sly's hand.

Sly shook his head and let out a pitying laugh. "You don't know what you're in for, Tony," he said. "I tried work once. It really bites."

"You and me are different, Sylvester," Tony insisted.

"You're right about that, pal," Sly agreed.

"No, I mean I'm not lazy like you."

"Since when?" Sly asked.

"Ha, ha, very funny," Tony said. "Like I said, you just wait and see." Tony marched out of the Garrisons' garage and down the street, leaving Sly and the rest of the Dreams staring after him.

He didn't slow down until he had slammed the door of his own bedroom behind him. In his hand, Tony held the want ads from that day's local paper, which his dad had left on the living-room couch.

Flopping down on the bed, Tony grabbed a red pencil from the bedside table and began poring through the columns of advertisements.

There were lots of jobs open, but all of them seemed to require experience, which Tony didn't have.

Then he spotted the "Temporary" section. Yeah, temporary . . . that was for him. The more temporary, the better.

He found what he was looking for under the heading "Word Processors."

The ad read: "Some typing, start at \$9 an hour, no experience necessary."

Hey, why not? Tony thought. He knew a lot of words, and whatever the process was, he could figure it out. Besides, he'd had a typing course in junior high!

Nine dollars an hour was great pay—and as for "no experience," he qualified!

"Perfect," he said under his breath, circling the ad in red. "I'll show you, Sly. And I'll show Sharkey, too!"

Chapter 4

"Hot Rocks Promotions," a voice said.

"Hello, this is Sylvester Winkle, of Winkle Management. I'd like to speak with Mr. Snuffy McTaggart."

Sly looked at the clock on the cafeteria wall. He was late for fifth period, but Mr. Hoople would just have to start the discussion of Charles Dickens without him.

Sly covered the mouthpiece with his hand, hoping that the secretary on the other end of the line couldn't hear the racket of the lunchroom.

"Mr. McTaggart is in a meeting. May I ask what this call is in reference to?"

"It's about the South Coast Arts Festival," Sly explained. "I'd like to tell him about a really outrageous band I represent. They're called California Dreams, and—"

"Mr. McTaggart is very busy today. You'll have to call again tomorrow, Mr., uh . . ."

"Winkle. Sly Winkle," Sly said into the receiver. "But I can call him back."

"Or I could have him return your call. Why don't you give me your office number, and—"

"Uh, no, that's okay, I'll call again," Sly said, hurriedly hanging up. He had just caught sight of Markie Malone coming into the cafeteria. Sly slicked back his hair and started off in her direction.

The South Coast Arts Festival could wait till tomorrow.

• • •

"Hey, where's the Slymeister?" Samantha Woo asked as California Dreams gathered in the Garrison family's garage for their Wednesday afternoon practice session.

"Did he say anything about not coming?" Tiffani asked Jake.

"Nah," Jake replied. "When we were at our lockers, he just said he had to do something, and went off somewhere. I thought he meant for a minute."

"Yeah," Matt confirmed. "We waited for him for half an hour before we realized he wasn't coming back."

"Should we start without him?" Sam asked.

"I guess so," Matt said. "Sly won't mind. It feels weird, though, to be practicing without Tony. I mean, one practice was bad enough."

"I sure hope his new job works out okay," Tiffani said. "I still can't believe Sharkey fired him."

"Tony didn't seem too upset about it this morning," Matt said. "I guess it's because he got that new word processing job right away."

"What a great confidence booster," Samantha said.

"Yeah," Jake agreed. "And how much did he say he was gettin' paid?"

"Nine an hour," Matt said.

Jake let out a low whistle. "I didn't even know the dude could type, let alone do computers."

"I guess we all have our hidden talents," Tiffani said with a happy shrug. "Anyway, I hope he makes a ton of money real fast."

"Yeah," Samantha agreed. "The sooner he gets that new drum set, the sooner we get him back here for practice!"

"Oh well," Matt said with a sigh. "Let's give it a try, anyway. How about 'Don't Forget to Write'?"

The Dreams launched into the song, but it wasn't long before they were exchanging woeful glances.

"It isn't the same without drums, is it?" Matt said when the song was over.

"It sure isn't," Sam agreed. "I just couldn't get into it."

"We could try a slow song," Tiffani suggested. "How about 'Please Come Home'?"

"It's no use, Tiff," Jake said. "We're like a body without a soul."

"A ship without a sail," Matt added.

"A sandwich without the bread," Sam chimed in.

"Would you guys quit it?" Tiffani said, as they all started laughing together.

"What's so funny?" Sly asked, poking his head through the door that led into the garage from the Garrisons' kitchen. He had his book bag slung over one shoulder and two of Mrs. Garrison's muffins in his other hand.

"Yo, Twinkle," Jake said with a wry grin. "Where've you been, man? You said you had to do something, and that's the last we saw of you. We were waitin' there for half an hour!"

"Sorry, dude," Sly replied, closing his eyes. "I heard the call of romance, and I had to answer it."

"The call of romance?" Matt repeated.

"You went off chasin' after some babe and left us hangin' there?" Jake asked incredulously.

"You could put it that way," Sly said, shrugging. "But trust me, this was important. There are no other babes like this babe."

"Who are we talking about here?" Jake asked.

"Yeah," Tiffani said, tucking a lock of hair behind an ear. "What is this, the return of Jenny?"

For the longest time, Sly had been crazy about Matt's sister Jenny—who never wanted any part of him.

"Ah, Jenny . . ." Sly said, sighing mournfully.

"She was all right, but Markie is the girl of my dreams. My Mona Lisa, my red-headed passion flower . . ."

"He's gone out of his mind," Jake said, waving him off. "Get a doctor."

"Sly?" Matt said, running his hand up and down in front of Sly's glazed eyes. "Are you still there?"

"Funny—I thought you said Markie Malone had to be a loser," Samantha reminded him.

"That was before I saw her," Sly said, still glassy-eyed.

"And ever since then, you've been obsessed with her, right, Wimple?" Jake asked.

"You could put it that way," Sly said, turning to smile at him dreamily.

"Pathetic," Jake said, shaking his head in disgust.

"Well, you've seen her," Sly said. "What do you think?"

Jake thought for a moment. "A definite eleven on a scale of one to ten," he admitted.

"She's a babe, okay?" Matt agreed. "But Sly, you don't even know her. How can you be so crazy about her already?"

"My first impressions of people are invariably correct," Sly said with conviction. "She's an angel."

"So you've been with her all this time, when you were supposed to be here?" Samantha asked.

"I was walking her home," Sly told her. "I was helping carry her books."

"And let me guess—she let you kiss her feet, right?" Jake asked disgustedly. "Wimple, take a cold shower, huh?"

"Look, I'm here now," Sly said. "So why don't you guys just play?"

"We miss Tony," Tiffani told him. "It's not the same without drums."

"Well, where does he get off, taking a job that makes him miss practice?" Sly asked indignantly.

"Uh, Sly," Matt pointed out, "you also missed some of it."

"That's different!" Sly insisted. "How can you compare spending time with a girl like Markie with work?" He said the last word as if he'd just eaten something that tasted nasty. "Besides, Tony's the drummer. I'm only the manager! You can play without me."

"We can't *perform* without you, though," Jake interjected. "Speaking of which, Mr. Manager—how's it coming with the South Coast Arts Festival? Have we got the gig yet?"

"I told you last time," Sly said defensively. "I'm just working out the final details. It's in the bag."

"Have you even contacted them about us yet?" Sam asked, raising her eyebrows.

Sly gave her a smug smile. "As a matter of fact,

you'll be happy to know that I am just a single phone call away from nailing down the gig."

"Well, are you gonna make this phone call any time soon? Or are you going to be too busy chasing after the latest love of your life?" Jake pressed him.

"Come on, you guys!" Tiffani interrupted. "If he says he's working on it, he's working on it. Right now, he's here to hear us play—so let's play."

"Right," Matt agreed. "Sly, do we have your full attention, dude?"

"Of course, my man," Sly assured him, settling back to listen as the band played "Please Come Home."

The lack of drums didn't bother Sly. Not one bit. In his mind, the music carried him out of the Garrisons' garage, through the air, and into the arms of Markie Malone. They were at Lookout Point, necking in his dad's car. Markie was telling him that he was the most attractive man she'd ever, ever met. . . .

* * *

Tony wiped the cold sweat from his brow and tried to pry the starched collar of his shirt away from his neck. His tie was practically choking him, even though he'd loosened it twice already.

He had never felt more totally unprepared for anything in his entire life. On Tuesday morning, when he'd first inquired about the job over the phone, they'd asked him how many words a minute

he could type. Not knowing what to say, Tony had made a wild guess: "About a hundred."

That answer had produced a respectful silence on the other end of the line. Then they asked if he knew WordPerfect. "Pretty perfect," he'd responded.

Evidently, they thought he was making an extremely funny joke. "Tell you what, Mr. Wicks," the agency's personnel director had said. "Usually we have people in for a typing test, but since you're the only person available late afternoon to early evening, I'd like to send you over to the Acme Insurance Group. They need someone to start tomorrow. Can you be there?"

Well, here he was.

After showing him the bathroom and the soda machine, his immediate superior, Ms. Marks, had led him to his desk, given him a password to log on to the computer, and left him sitting there.

The first thing Tony found out was that a password is not much use unless you can turn the computer on. Not wanting to ask, he kept craning his neck and strolling around the cubicles nearby, hoping to catch someone else in the act of turning his or her computer on or off.

Finally he gave up. Sinking back into his chair, he leaned his head on his keyboard—and abracadabra! His monitor blinked on, asking him for his password, just as Ms. Marks came marching back down the hall toward his cubicle.

"I see we're getting along just fine," she said with a simpering smile. Tony returned the smile and took the forms from her.

"Now this is form 2R448," she said. "Accident claim report. And this," she said, shuffling the papers he was holding, "is form 3R665A, accidental death claims adjustment. What I need you to do is to feed the data into our spreadsheet and run off some form letters in reply. They're in the WordPerfect data bank under 'First Reply, batch 94.' Any questions?"

That was when Tony first felt the beads of cold sweat breaking out all over his body. His white shirt and tie suddenly felt like a suit of armor that was about six sizes too tight.

He spent the next hour shuffling papers, hitting the odd stray button on the computer, watching the monitor to see what reaction he got, and getting up to visit the bathroom, the Coke machine, the supply closet. He even straightened his desk—anything to avoid doing what he had no idea how to do!

Now he sat watching tropical fish swim across his computer screen, not knowing how or why they had appeared. It was sort of like a video game, he thought, panicking quietly. Except that there were no instructions and no joystick.

"Well, Mr. Wicks, how are we getting along?" Tony leaped about six feet in the air at the sound of Ms. Marks's voice over his shoulder. He was surprised his head didn't hit the sound-baffling ceiling tiles.

"Whuh . . . fine!" he said, flailing in his mind for a way out of this nightmare. "I was just . . . uh . . ."

"Here, let me have a look," Ms. Marks said, bending over his keyboard and hitting a button.

The fish disappeared, and the screen showed the same words it had been flashing before they first swam onto the scene. "Command unknown."

"I don't understand," Ms. Marks said.

"Neither do I," Tony agreed.

"Where's the data you keyed in?" she asked.

"Keyed in?" Tony repeated dumbly. "Data?"

"Mr. Wicks," Ms. Marks said, her brow furrowing in concern. "Are you all right?"

"No," Tony responded. "I'm, uh . . . I'm, uh . . ."

"Haven't you even started?" she asked, not quite willing to believe the awful truth.

"Not quite," Tony said, attempting a feeble smile and failing even that. "I was just going to—"

"The temporary agency assured me that your WordPerfect skills were up to par," she said, suddenly getting huffy.

"They did?" Tony asked, wincing.

"They certainly did!" Ms. Marks said with a withering look. "And let me tell you, this is the last time I'll ever use them for anything! You're fired, Mr. Wicks!"

"Thank you," Tony whispered, as much to the merciful universe as to the furious Ms. Marks. "Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Getting up and starting down the hall, he suddenly realized something. "Do I still get paid for the hour I worked?" he ventured tentatively.

"What?!" Ms. Marks gasped.

"Never mind," Tony said, putting up a shielding hand. "Forget it."

He retreated out of there, swearing to himself that he would never take a job under false pretenses again. He had learned his lesson, all right. The hard way.

The only trouble was, what was he going to do now to make six hundred dollars?

So much for word processing, Tony thought to himself. *So much for office work, period!* He took off his tie and unbuttoned the two top buttons of his shirt, put on his ultracool shades, and turned his face to the refreshing ocean breeze.

What I need is to get out in the sunshine and work with my hands, he told himself reassuringly. But where could he do that for nine dollars an hour?

Well, never mind. What had he been thinking, anyway? He was not cut out to be the suit-and-tie type of guy. He needed a job where he could be himself!

Sly had been right the first time, Tony realized, nodding slowly. He was determined to get that drum set, and nothing could stand in his way. Something was bound to turn up. He strode off down the street, his confidence flooding back with every step he took.

And then—as if by magic—it happened.

"You can't talk to me like that!" a loud voice came from the other side of a high hedge. "I'm not some trained monkey—I'm a human being!"

"Oh yeah?" a gruff voice answered. "A monkey could have done a better job on those hedges. What am I paying you for, anyway?"

"For putting up with you, that's what!"

Peeking through the hedges, Tony saw that the voices belonged to a pair of landscapers. One of them was middle-aged and stocky with gray hair and a sunburned face. The other was younger and held a gas-powered hedge trimmer in his hands.

"Well, you don't have to put up with me anymore," said the older man. "You're fired!"

"Oh yeah?" said the younger man, throwing down the hedge trimmer. "You can't fire me: I quit!!" And without waiting for an answer, he stormed off, leaving his boss standing there, steaming.

"Er, excuse me," Tony said, pushing aside the hedge so the man could see him. "I couldn't help overhearing. Do you need someone to work for you?"

"Hmph," the gruff man grunted. "Come on around here where I can see you."

Tony came around the side of the hedge. The man looked him up and down. "You have any landscaping experience?"

Tony considered the question. He'd mowed his old man's lawn hundreds of times. Their yard didn't

have any hedges or bushes, but how difficult could it be to operate a gas-powered trimmer?

"Sure, I've got lots of experience!" Tony said enthusiastically. "I can work only late afternoons and weekends, though."

"That's okay," the guy said. "As long as you're good."

"Oh, I'm good," Tony said, suddenly feeling very sure of himself.

"All right, then," the man said, still frowning. "Name's Vito. And you are . . . ?"

"Tony," he said, offering the man his hand. "Tony Wicks."

"Okay, Tony Wicks," Vito said, taking his hand and shaking it slowly. "Where do you live?"

Tony gave him the address and Vito said, "I'll pick you up Saturday morning at nine. Is ten dollars an hour all right?"

Ten dollars an hour! "Uh, yeah, I guess that's okay," Tony said, trying not to betray his excitement. "Nine o'clock Saturday. I'll be ready."

He waved good-bye and got out of there as fast as he could. When he turned the corner, he let out a whoop of joy.

Ten dollars an hour! Man, Sly was going to lose that bet in a hurry! "Pearl drums, here I come!"

Chapter 5

"Why don't you just give up, Twinkle?" Jake asked as he watched Markie Malone's sleek figure retreat down the hallway. He worked the combination on his locker, shaking his head at Sly's unbelievable persistence.

"I never give up, Jake," Sly countered. "I have no reason to give up. Markie Malone is madly in love with me already. It's just that she hasn't caught on to the truth yet."

"Neither has anyone else," Jake pointed out. "From over here, it looks like the girl thinks you're an annoying pest."

Sly laughed. "Ha! I know it looks like that. Don't you think I know that most people think I'm making a fool of myself? But Jake, when a person really sets his mind to something—"

"I know, I know," Jake stopped him.

"You just wait and see," Sly said, patting Jake on the back. "Hey, Markie! Wait up!" he shouted, taking off after her.

Jake shook his head in disbelief. "If Sly worked that hard on getting the Dreams noticed," he said under his breath, "we'd be bigger than the Beatles by now."

* * *

Sly threw open the stairway door, but Markie had given him the slip. She must have seen him coming, Sly realized. *She's running from me—but she can't run from her own feelings. She's already crazy about me. It's just a matter of time.*

Sly looked down and there, at his feet, lay a copy of *Feminine Mystique* magazine. *Markie must have dropped it when she took off running!* Sly thought.

Sly examined the cover. "The magic of mascara," he read, making a face. "Why men respect women who say 'no.' Hmm . . ." *Maybe that's it. Maybe Markie is just playing hard to get. . . .*

"Ah, this looks promising," he said, his eyebrows rising. "'What a girl really wants in a guy.' Hey—the pages are ripped out!"

Markie must really have liked that article, Sly reasoned. Well, it would be easy enough to find another copy of *Feminine Mystique*. . . .

"Can I help you, young man?" The woman's hair was bluish gray, her glasses were horn-rimmed, and strung around her neck was a hideous fake pearl necklace. She had to be around ninety, Sly decided as she gave him a perplexed look. He stood at the rack of women's magazines. He already had several in his hands and was trying to keep them from falling to the floor.

Where in the world is Feminine Mystique? he wondered. It was driving him crazy. This store had to have every other women's magazine in the world!

"Is there something special you're looking for?" the woman asked.

"Uh, no!" Sly said, trying to shove some of the magazines back into their racks. "Just . . . looking."

The woman gave him a dubious glance before wheeling around and going back behind the cash register.

Oh, so what? Sly asked himself. What did he care what this woman thought of him? After all, it wasn't like she was one of his friends. He'd probably never even see her again.

"Um, excuse me," he called to her. "Do you happen to have, uh, *Feminine Mystique*?"

"I beg your pardon?" the woman asked, arching her eyebrows.

"I don't mean you personally!" Sly hastened

to correct her. "I mean, the magazine."

"Oh, I see," the woman said, fluttering her hand over her heart and looking him up and down. "Yes, I think we do. We have an extensive choice of . . . er, women's magazines."

"It's for a friend," Sly explained.

"I'm sure it's none of my concern who you're buying it for, young man," the woman huffed. She walked past him and picked a copy of *Feminine Mystique* from right in front of Sly's nose. "Here you are," she said, handing it to him and striding away again.

Humbled, Sly looked down at the magazine in his hands. He checked to see if the article was actually there. Yes—there it was. Pretty long, too. But if he read quickly, maybe he wouldn't have to buy the stupid rag . . .

"Hi, Sly!"

Sly's heart nearly leaped right out of his throat when he heard Samantha's voice calling out to him. She and Tony had just come into the store and were heading his way!

Thinking fast, Sly grabbed a copy of *Young Mercenary* and one of *Macho Man*, and sandwiched his copy of *Feminine Mystique* between them.

"Hey, Sylvester, I didn't know you could even read!" Tony quipped. "What's with *Macho Man*? You turning over a new leaf?"

"Very funny," Sly shot back, thrusting his chin into the air. "I happen to be extremely macho."

"Are you a young mercenary, too?" Sam asked, noticing the magazine that was flopping down at the bottom of Sly's little pile.

"Just thought I'd expand my horizons," Sly admitted.

"Uh-huh," Sam said skeptically, her dark eyes twinkling with amusement. "And what else have you got here?"

"Don't touch that!" The words flew out of Sly's mouth before he could bite his tongue. Sam raised an eyebrow and so did Tony.

"Look at that righteous babe over there, Sylvester," Tony said, pointing. When Sly's reflexes caused him to comply, Tony quickly lifted *Feminine Mystique* from Sly's grasp. "Aha, what have we here? Why, Sylvester Winkle!"

"Shut up, Tony," Sly said, unsuccessfully trying to grab the magazine back.

"The magic of mascara?" Sam read, giving Tony an amused look. "Sly, with your eyelashes, you don't even need mascara."

"You know, you guys, I don't appreciate this," Sly said, yanking the magazine out of Tony's hands and storming over to the cash register.

"Ah, what the heck," he muttered, putting aside the two men's magazines. "Just the one, please," he told the woman behind the counter.

She rang it up without saying a word. "It's for a friend," Sly called back to Sam and Tony, who

obviously had no idea what to make of his behavior.

"Right," Sam said.

"Whatever you say, Sylvester," Tony added, wide-eyed.

"Everything okay with you guys?" Sly asked, changing the subject as the woman counted out his change.

"Tony's got a new job!" Sam said excitedly. "Ten bucks an hour!"

"I'm gonna win that bet, Sylvester," Tony warned him.

"What's the job?" Sly asked.

"Lawn care specialist," Tony said, sticking out his chest importantly.

"What?" Sly asked, screwing up his features. "What do you know about lawn care?"

"You can pay ten dollars an hour to find out," Tony said. "Just like everybody else." He gave Sam a high five.

"Good luck," Sly said as he took his change and waved good-bye. "You're gonna need it."

He should have stayed with word processing, Sly thought to himself as he left the store. He gave Tony about two days before he screwed up and got fired. Manual labor was no more Tony's thing than it was his own.

But right now, Sly had more important things to think about—and to read.

He sat down on one of the benches that lined the

California Dreams

boulevard and opened his copy of *Feminine Mystique*.

"Most of you girls have had it up to here with guys who are only after one thing," Sly read. "So what is it you really want from him?"

Sly read on, eagerly drinking in the startling new information. "Good looks and a good body do matter, but what really wins a girl's heart is romance. A guy who buys a girl imported chocolates and shows up with a bouquet of flowers, a guy who knows when to whisper sweet nothings in her ear. . . ."

Sweet nothings? Sly thought, confused. *What's that supposed to mean?* He tried to think of a few sweet nothings. He said them aloud, trying them on for size. "'How 'bout planting a big wet one right here?' 'Enough about me; let's talk about you—what do you think of me?'" He decided that he was a veritable master of sweet nothings, and read on.

"A guy who'll take her to elegant, candlelit French restaurants and to foreign films with subtitles, where the characters talk about their souls and their dreams instead of chasing each other in cars and ranking each other out. . . ."

Give me a break, Sly thought, groaning. *No wonder girls are so hard to understand! All their thoughts are in subtitles!*

"That's the guy most of you girls are dreaming of—and why not? Why shouldn't the man of your dreams be someone who makes all your dreams of romance come true?"

Dreamers and Schemers

Sly pursed his lips and nodded his head sagely. *Very educational,* he thought. *This is definitely an excellent magazine.*

Not that he hadn't tried the sophisticated, suave, romantic approach before. He'd almost put it over on Jenny Garrison, too, before she'd caught on and let him have it with both barrels.

"Hey," he told himself, tucking the magazine under his arm as he got up to head home. "I can do romantic, sophisticated, and suave. No problem!" After all, the secret to life was knowing how to fake it. And Sly Winkle could fake it with the best of them.

* * *

What a wonderful thing it is to have a plan of action, Sly reflected as he sat at his regular table at Sharkey's that Thursday afternoon, waiting for the rest of the Dreams to show up.

The band always hung out at the restaurant on Thursdays after school. Thursday was laundry day at the Garrison house, and since the washer and dryer were in the garage, the band couldn't practice.

But Sly had a very specific reason for being here today. And the reason now came stumbling through the swinging door from the kitchen, his tray loaded with Sly's shake and fries.

"Stu! My man!" Sly said, giving the hapless waiter a slap on the shoulder. Stu reacted with a

quick jerk, tipping the chocolate shake all over Sly's sleeve.

"Oh, gosh, I'm so sorry!" Stu moaned, slamming the tray down on the table so hard that fries went flying in all directions. Stu scrambled to yank his towel out from his belt, but the rag seemed to be snagged there permanently.

"That's okay, pal," Sly assured him. "It does happen to be my best shirt, but . . ."

"Oh, sorry, sorry, I'm just so nervous with my uncle around. All the pressure . . ."

"It's okay, I said!" Sly yelled, grabbing Stu by both shoulders and calming him down. "I'm not mad, okay?"

"It's just that I'm starting to wonder if I'm really cut out for this kind of work," Stu moaned. "That's the fourth spill today, and I just started my shift half an hour ago. You're sure you're not mad?"

"Of course not!" Sly insisted. "Not at all."

"And you won't say anything to my uncle?"

"My lips are sealed," Sly said, locking them up with an imaginary key. "Of course, there is one thing you could do for me . . ."

"Really?"

"No, never mind, you wouldn't be willing."

"Sure I would," Stu said eagerly. "Anything! You've been so nice to me."

"Weeell," Sly said, stretching out the moment. "I could use a little help with math. You're so good at it."

"Are you kidding?" Stu squinted in surprise. "I'm the worst in the whole class!"

"Except for me," Sly insisted. "That A was a total fluke, I swear. I need tutoring for tomorrow's quiz. So how about I come over to your house around seven-thirty tonight?"

"Tonight?" Stu asked, thinking it over.

"It's all settled then," Sly said. "Thanks, Stu. Now, could you get me a wet washcloth? This is my best shirt, after all . . ."

* * *

Sly showed up at the Malone house right on time. "Come on in," Stu told him, leading him to the living-room sofa. All Stu's math stuff was neatly laid out on the coffee table. "I'm ready for our tutoring session."

"Great, that's great," Sly said absentmindedly, scoping out the place. He glanced in the mirror that stood by the front door to make sure he still looked his very best. "Uh, where's Markie, by the way?" he asked casually.

"Yuck," Stu said. "Why'd you have to bring her up? I just ate dinner."

"Where is she, Stu?" Sly pressed him. "Is she home?"

"She's up in her bedroom," Stu said. "Let's hope she stays there."

"Uh-huh," Sly said. "Listen, Stu, mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Go ahead," Stu said.

Sly bounded up the stairs to the second floor. "Hey!" Stu called after him. "There's one down here!"

"That's okay," Sly replied. "I'm already up here. Be back in a few minutes."

Markie's room . . . Markie's room . . . Let's see, which door would it be? Sly asked himself. He opened one at random.

"Yaaahhhh!!!" he exclaimed as boxes from the storage closet fell on his head. He stuffed them back in as quietly as he could, hoping no one had heard the commotion.

At the next door he decided to knock. A low canine growl answered. "Nice doggy," Sly said under his breath. "Niiice doggy."

He tiptoed down to the end of the hallway and knocked on another door. This time he scored. "Who is it?" that heavenly, feminine voice rang out.

"Sly Winkle," Sly called softly. "Bon soir! Can I come in for a minute?"

There was no answer, but a second or two later, Markie flung open the door. She stared at him as if he were from Mars.

"Oh—I was just downstairs, studying math with Stu," Sly explained. "And, I, uh, I brought you these." He quickly whipped the box of chocolates out of his inside jacket pocket and handed it to her. *Twenty dollars up in smoke*, he thought to himself.

with a pang, *but no regrets. Hey, it's for a good cause.*

"Chocolates!" Markie said, surprised. But then she said something that astonished Sly. "Thanks, but I hate chocolate." She handed the box back to him.

Sly was taken aback, but he wasn't done yet. "And, I brought you *this*," he added, pulling a long-stemmed rose from behind his back.

"Ahhh-choo!!!
Markie sneezed, and then sneezed again and again. "Sorry—I'm allergic," she explained, pushing the rose away from her. "Thanks anyway."

"I, uh, was wondering," Sly said, ignoring the setback and striking while the iron was hot. "There's a great Bulgarian film playing at the Plex—it's in black-and-white, with titles. It's called *The Dark Pit of the Soul*, or something like that. Want to go?"

"Sounds like a yawn," Markie commented drily.

"We could go to an elegant French restaurant first," Sly added quickly.

"Too fattening," Markie said. "Sly, why don't you just go study your math with Stu. This is all very nice of you and everything, but I'm kind of busy. I've got to wash my hair and do my nails."

Sly was speechless. None of it had worked! So much for *Feminine Mystique*. . . .

"Here's your magazine back," he said, handing it to her. "I found it on the stairs the other day."

"This isn't mine," Markie said, shaking her

head. "I never read dumb magazines like this. Here," she said, handing it back to him. "Why don't you keep it? Maybe you can pick up a few pointers." With a mocking smile, she shut the door in his face.

Sly stumbled back downstairs like a zombie and headed straight for the front door.

"Hey!" Stu called after him. "Where are you going? We haven't even started our math session!"

"I've got to do some studying on a very different subject," Sly said as he opened the door.

He stepped onto the front porch and shut the door, leaving a very perplexed Stu Malone staring after him.

Chapter 6

"The reason I hired you just like that," Vito confided as he drove with Tony to their first assignment on Saturday morning, "is that I got a lotta contracts, know what I'm sayin'? A lotta people want their lawns done, and they know Vito's the man. So I needed the help right away. And you say you got experience?" he asked.

"Oh yeah," Tony said, pursing his lips and nodding slowly. "Still, you might want to start me on something simple—it's been a while. I've been doing other things lately."

"Yeah? Like what?" Vito asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, you know, computers," Tony said casually. "And personnel management," he added, thinking of Sharkey's. Managing eight tables of hungry patrons

qualified as personnel management, didn't it?

Vito looked distinctly impressed. "Yeah, personnel management and computers. Hmm . . ."

He pulled the truck over in front of a condo complex with two-story garden apartments. A sign in front read: DESERT BLOOM LUXURY CONDOS. RENT OR SALE. But they didn't look luxurious to Tony—just ordinary.

"This place is a breeze," Vito told him as they unloaded a mower from the back of the truck. "They're one of my oldest clients. Steady payers, and nothin' to the job. You just mow the lawn and trim the hedges." He slapped Tony on the back reassuringly. "I'll see you later, pal."

"W-w-wait a minute," Tony said, suddenly feeling his knees go weak. "Y-y-you mean, you're not staying?"

"Nah," Vito replied, hopping back up into the driver's seat of the truck. "I gotta get over to the other side of town. I gotta lotta contracts." He gave Tony a wink. "I'll pick you up in an hour, my friend."

Tony waved weakly as Vito drove off, then turned around to look at the job in front of him. "Come on, what are you worried about, Wicks?" he asked himself out loud. "It's just a job!"

Maybe it's a good thing that Vito won't be here, staring over my shoulder every minute, Tony thought to himself. The job didn't look so difficult, now that he really examined it. How hard could it be to mow

the lawn and trim some hedges? And the thought of the ten dollars an hour he'd be pocketing at the end of the day was oh so sweet. With renewed confidence, Tony set to work.

Half an hour later, he'd mowed the lawn to perfection and hadn't even broken a sweat. This was going to be a breeze! Looking over his work, Tony had to admire the job he'd done. The lawn, which had seemed scruffy before, now looked like a golf course fairway.

Residents strolled by occasionally, and some of them waved good morning to him. Tony liked this place—he felt comfortable here. More importantly, he liked this job. *I'm suited to outdoor work,* he told himself. In fact, he might even go so far as to call himself a born landscaper.

Surveying the hedges, Tony slowly sized them up. He hoisted the gas-powered trimmer in his hands and tried to see the various possibilities.

Soon the trimmer's motor was humming, and Tony was doing his thing. "Tony Scissorhands, they call me!" he exulted happily, letting out a maniacal laugh as branches and leaves flew in all directions. "Let's see. I'll make this one an elephant . . . yeah, with a big, long trunk!"

A little more here . . . hmm, how about if I cut this end lower? No, that doesn't work. But if I cut the back of the elephant to match . . .

"AAAAAHHHH!!!" Tony heard a cry of horror

over the noise of the trimmer's motor. He shut it off, wheeling around to see what was the matter.

"My hedges! My beautiful hedges!" An old, balding man stared at the remains of the hedges through thick glasses. He grabbed both sides of his bald head as if it were exploding. "Harry! Ethel! Get out here!! Our hedges have been massacred!"

Tony was stunned. Surveying his handiwork, he had to admit he might have overdone it some. In fact, a few of the hedges had been reduced to woody stumps. But you couldn't deny the creativity he'd put into his work. One hedge was shaped sort of like a Porsche, if you looked at it from the right direction. And another was unmistakably a pyramid.

"*You!!*" the man raged, turning his murderous, magnified gaze on Tony. "*You did this!*" He began advancing on Tony, step by step, inch by inch, as his fellow condo dwellers, almost all of them elderly, emerged from their apartments. In their flannel nightgowns and bathrobes, they stared in horror at the unspeakable abomination that had been visited upon their prized shrubbery.

Tony held the trimmer up in front of him for protection as he slowly backed away from the advancing residents. "I'm sorry," he said in a useless attempt to mollify their anger. "I, uh, just thought they could use a little jazzing up."

"*Jazzing up!?*" the first man yelled. "*Jazzing up?* Harry, he calls this jazzing up! Ethel, did you

hear this kid? Jazzing up the hedges, he calls it! *Look at this bush—it's been murdered in cold blood!*"

"Murderer!" screamed Ethel, pointing a bony finger at Tony, who was slowly being surrounded by the enraged condo dwellers. "You'll pay for this!"

"Please, I . . . uh . . . I only work here!" Tony stammered. "I didn't mean to—"

Before he could finish, Vito's truck pulled up, and Tony's boss got out to see what all the commotion was about.

"Look what your man did to our hedges!" the first man screamed, holding shredded branches in his shaking hands. "He massacred them!"

"What—what did you do, Tony?" Vito asked, stupefied. Then suddenly his face grew tight and a vein in his high forehead began pulsing relentlessly. Tony stared at the vein, fascinated, wondering if Vito was going to have a stroke right then and there.

"You imbecile! You moron! What are you trying to do, make me lose my customers?" Vito grabbed the hedge trimmer from Tony and tossed it to the ground. Then, putting his chest right up against Tony's and grabbing one of Tony's ears, he screamed, "You stupid idiot! Now I've gotta give these people new hedges! These are my best, oldest customers, do you realize that?!"

"I, uh, I . . . uh . . ." Tony struggled to get his ear free, but it was no use. It would have come off in

Vito's hand if he'd tried to escape. "I don't have any money to—"

"*You're fired!!*" Vito bellowed, shoving him to the ground and pointing down at him. "And if I ever see your incompetent face again, I'm gonna do to you what you did to these hedges!"

"Yes, sir," Tony said, grateful to beat a hasty retreat. "Sorry, Vito. Sorry, Ethel, Harry . . . Sorry, everybody . . ."

"Don't let me catch you around here again!" the bald man with the thick glasses shouted after him, shaking his fist in the air.

Tony raced down the street and around the corner, rubbing his sore ear as he went. He was totally, *totally* bummed out. He thought he'd done a really radical job on those hedges! And where was he going to find another job that paid ten dollars an hour?

Well, Tony thought as he headed home, at least I know I can wait tables. It paid pretty well, if you figured in the tips—and there had to be dozens of restaurants around. Surely, one of them could use an experienced waiter.

Needing to erase the sting of what had just happened and restore his shattered confidence, Tony made up his mind then and there to look for a waiter job right away.

After heading home to clean up and change clothes, he went down to the beachfront, where most of Redondo Beach's food places were located.

Starting at one end of the strip, Tony went into every single place he passed, asking if they needed anybody. But incredibly, not one restaurant was looking for help! Tony gazed longingly at the huge shark taking a bite out of a surfboard that adorned the entrance to Sharkey's, but he passed his old hangout by. Sharkey knew his phone number. He could call Tony if he needed him.

Tony shook his head sadly. How had things come to this? How had his fortunes sunk so low?

"Hey, Tony!" a melodious female voice rang out from behind him.

"Jasmine!" Tony admired her outfit. In her blue tank top and white shorty shorts, she looked terrific. "How're you doin', baby?" he asked as he took her in his arms and gave her a squeeze. He leaned in and gave her a kiss. *Now, this is living!* Tony thought as he held her tightly in his arms.

"Where've you been, Tony?" Jasmine asked as they finally broke apart. Her dark eyes stared longingly into his. "It seems like you're never around anymore. And you haven't taken me out in two whole weeks!"

"I've been working," Tony told her. "Trying to buy myself that set of Pearl drums."

"Are they good?" Jasmine asked.

"The best," Tony assured her. "I would never ignore you just to get some everyday, ordinary set of drums. These are extremely fresh. They don't play themselves, but pretty near."

"I can see how much you want them," Jasmine said with a sigh. "I just wish you had a little time for me. Talking on the phone every few days and waving to you in Spanish class just isn't the same as going out. How long are you going to have to keep this up?"

"Well, it might be a while, Jasmine," Tony said, trying to break the news as gently as he could. "I've got a long way to go yet till I've got the cash."

"You mean, we're not going to go out this week or next week, either?" she asked, her lips curving down in a pout.

"It doesn't look too good for that right now," Tony confessed. "See, I haven't exactly been raking in the bucks since Sharkey fired me," he added, not wanting to go into all the gory details of his recent job experiences.

"Oh, Tony!" Jasmine said, giving him a consoling kiss on the cheek. "How much more money do you need to earn? I've got some cash in my piggy bank. I could loan it to you."

"I need six hundred dollars," Tony said with a sigh.

"What?!" Jasmine's jaw dropped. "Tony, how are you going to make that kind of money? You and I are never going to get to go out again!"

"Yes, we will, Jasmine. Just give me a few more weeks. I'll make it up to you, I promise!"

"A few more weeks?! Tony, do you really want me to stay at home every Saturday night waiting for

you? I mean, these are the best years of my life!"

"I know, Jasmine, but these are *Pearl* drums, see. And besides—I kind of made a promise to myself. I'm trying to prove something."

"Prove something?"

"Yeah," Tony said, staring off into the distance. "I told myself I'd earn the money for those drums, and now I've just got to do it."

Jasmine smiled. "I think it's great that you're working so hard for this. It's important to follow our dreams, no matter where they lead us."

"So you'll be there for me?"

"Sure I will," Jasmine told him, flashing him her gorgeous smile. She leaned forward to give him a long, lingering kiss.

Tony broke away at last, out of breath. "Whoa, Jasmine, I sure do miss you."

"You go earn that money, Tony," Jasmine said, running a finger lightly down his T-shirt. "And whenever you need me, remember—I'm there for you."

A car horn honked behind them, and Tony looked over Jasmine's shoulder to see Willy Branson, a football player at PCHS, waving at her.

"Jazz, you gonna get over that lame excuse for a guy and go out with me tonight?" Willy called out.

Jasmine frowned. "I told you, Willy," she replied, putting a hand on her hip. "I'm seeing Tony, and I'm not interested in anybody else right now."

"Is he treating you all right?" Willy asked, giv-

ing Tony a knowing look. "'Cause if he isn't, you know where to find me!" With that and another honk on his horn, Willy sped off.

"I'd like to show that guy who he's dealing with," Tony said angrily.

"Don't mind him," Jasmine said with a sultry smile. "He's been trying to get me to go out with him for months."

"But you're not gonna go out with him, right?" Tony asked, looking for some reassurance.

"No, I'm not," Jasmine told him. "But don't be too long about getting those drums, all right? Because staying home or hanging out with my girlfriends on Saturday night isn't half as much fun as going out with you."

Tony gave Jasmine a quick kiss good-bye and took off toward home, his mind a blur of troubles. "Maybe I should just give up," he said to himself. "Maybe Sly's right—maybe I'm just a loser who can't make it no matter how hard he tries—

"Wait a minute!" he stopped himself. "What am I saying? I'm Tony Wicks, the King of Sticks, the man with the mojo, the style, the moves. I can get this money," he said defiantly. "I don't know how, but something's gonna turn up any minute now."

He strode toward the corner, the bounce returning to his step—and was almost bowled over by six huge dogs who were all straining at their leashes, heading for the big palm tree at the curb.

At the other end of the leashes was a small boy. The kid couldn't have been more than ten years old, and that would have been a stretch.

"Hey, little man," Tony said. "You oughta watch where those mutts pull you. Somebody's liable to get knocked over."

"You mean *you*?" the little kid said, squinting up at him. The boy's face was covered with freckles, and his baseball cap was pulled down low over his face. "You shoulda watched where you were goin'."

"Yeah. Right." Tony said. The kid was pretty feisty, but Tony wasn't going to let himself get annoyed. "Your momma lets you have all these dogs, huh?" he asked.

"They're not mine, you moron!" the kid said with a snort. "I get paid to walk 'em."

"Paid?" Tony repeated, surprised and impressed with the kid's enterprising spirit. "That's all right, little dude. I bet you pick up a few quarters that way, huh? Buy some candy?"

Again, the little kid snorted derisively. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulled out a thick wad of bills and waved them at Tony. "Yeah," he said. "A lotta quarters."

Tony looked at the little squirt, astounded. There had to be fifty dollars in that wad if there was a dime! "How long did it take you to earn that money?" he asked.

"Five days," the kid said, smiling smugly. "I

just put up my posters all over, and everybody calls me when they need a pet-sitter or a dog-walker. I'm savin' up for a Maserati, when I get old enough to drive."

"I'll bet you get it, too," Tony said sincerely. "I hope you do, Junior. You just gave me a good idea."

"I did?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "You take good care of those dogs, huh?"

Petting the bigger dogs so they would let him pass without taking a bite out of his shorts, Tony headed home, running so fast that his sneakers barely touched the ground.

A pet care specialist! The perfect part-time job for a resourceful guy like him! Why hadn't he thought of it before?

True, he'd never been much of an animal person—in fact, dogs made him nervous, and cats made him break out in hives.

But for that kind of money, he'd try anything!

Chapter 7

Tony spent all of Sunday on a whirlwind publicity campaign. He designed a flyer, complete with drawings of happy dogs and cats, and the logo PET PURR-FECT on top. He took it to the copy shop and had a hundred printed up.

With the flyers in hand, Tony called Jasmine and asked for her help. Together they put them up all over town, and by the end of the afternoon, anyone who lived in Redondo Beach could not avoid knowing about his new pet service—unless, of course, they never stepped outside.

The phone started ringing right around dinner time, and by the time Tony got to bed, he was literally in business.

He counted up all the jobs he'd landed: five pets to walk and two pet-sitting jobs. And all of them

were going to pay him half his week's wages *in advance!* By this time tomorrow, he'd have one hundred dollars in his pocket!

Now this is the way to go, he congratulated himself. This was more than just a job: This was a business. And he, Tony Wicks, was now officially an entrepreneur!

The only thing that puzzled him was that he hadn't thought of it sooner. The real money was in being your own boss. Even better, he wouldn't have to kiss up to anybody anymore. And nobody could fire him, either!

"You want something, you go for it, you get it," Tony said to himself as he crawled into bed that night. All his suffering as a word processor and as a landscaper had not been for nothing after all. Too bad his bet with Sly hadn't been for money!

* * *

Sly had been thinking about it long and hard, and had finally decided what he'd been doing wrong with Markie. He'd been too subtle. Too indirect. Why, she probably didn't even know that he was attracted to her!

Yes, women liked the direct, strong, no-bones-about-it approach. Forget flattery, forget feminine mystique—it was time to take control of the situation!

Sly regarded his image in the mirror that hung on his bedroom closet door. He narrowed his eyes, stuck out his chin, and winked at himself.

"Awesome," he said approvingly. "Winkle, you're irresistible. She won't know what hit her."

That Monday morning in homeroom, Sly wasted no time in cornering Markie. "I've been waiting for you," he said in a low but urgent tone.

"Oh yeah?" Markie said, raising her eyebrows. "Well, what do you want?"

"You." Sly gave her a meaningful look. "I'm taking you out this Saturday night. Get ready for a magic-carpet ride, Markie."

Markie made a face. "Get real!" she said.

Dropping all subtlety and reserve, Sly went for the gold. "Saturday night," he said. "I'll pick you up at eight."

"Sly," Markie replied, just as directly. "I wouldn't go out with you if you were the last man on earth. Now please excuse me," she added, brushing past him and heading for her seat.

Sly stared at the space where Markie had just been standing. *How did she resist me?* he wondered. Was it possible? Had even the direct approach left this girl cold? Or maybe . . .

Maybe, she's just playing hard to get! Sure, that had to be it!

Sly turned his attention back to the teacher, satisfied that he'd found the explanation for Markie's puzzling behavior. He actually succeeded in putting Markie out of his mind for the rest of the class.

As the teacher made some announcements

about after-school activities, Sly got the feeling that he was forgetting something. Something he was supposed to have done, and hadn't.

Now what was it?

* * *

The members of California Dreams—minus Tony Wicks—sat at their regular table at Sharkey's that afternoon.

"Hi, you guys!" Stu Malone greeted them with his goofy smile.

"Hi, Stu!" Tiffani waved back. "How's the waiting game going?"

"Huh?" Stu asked.

"The waiting game," Samantha said. "You know—being a waiter?"

"Oh! Oh yeah. Well, okay, I guess. I'm not dropping things as much as I did before. But I wish Tony were still here. He was a great trainer. And when he was here my uncle blamed Tony for my mistakes instead of blaming me."

"Poor Stu," Tiffani said as Sharkey's nephew stumbled off to wait on some other customers. "I kind of feel sorry for him."

"Not me," Jake said, leaning back and folding his arms across his chest. "He took Tony's job."

"It wasn't exactly his fault," Matt pointed out. "He didn't know Sharkey was going to fire someone to make room for him."

Jake shrugged. "I know, but it still wasn't fair to Tony."

"I wonder how Tony's doing with his landscaping job," Samantha said thoughtfully, taking a sip of her soda.

"No matter what," Tiffani said, "it has to be going better than the word processing. That was a real disaster."

"So is having a drummer who's never there for practice," Jake lamented. "The dude better get his six hundred fast, that's all I can say."

"We're not going to sound too great when we play at the South Coast Arts Festival if we don't practice together," Matt agreed.

"Assuming Sly got us the gig," Jake said doubtfully. "Which is assuming a lot."

"Oh, come on, Jake," Tiffani scolded him with a toss of her blond hair. "If Sly said the gig was in the bag, we should trust him."

"Yeah?" Jake shot back. "Why? His track record? Gimme a break."

"Speaking of Sly," Sam said, "here he comes now."

Sly burst into the restaurant and, spotting the Dreams, came right over to their table. "You guys have got to help me!" he said, still out of breath from running. "It's urgent!"

"What is it, Sly?" Tiffani asked, her green eyes filled with curiosity.

"Calm down!" Sam said, pulling over a chair.
"Here, have a seat and catch your breath!"

Sly took the seat, nodding gratefully. "It's
Markie," he said between gasps. "I've got an idea,
but I need you guys to help me pull it off."

"What can we do?" Tiffani asked.

"Here it is," Sly said, spreading his hands on
the table. "I tried flattering her. That didn't work. I
tried charming her with my sophisticated, romantic
side, but she didn't go for it. And when I just asked
her out directly, she practically told me to drop
dead!"

"Dude," Jake counseled, putting a hand on
Sly's knee, "why don't you just give it up? The chick
obviously isn't interested in you."

"Don't say that!" Sly said, shaking his head.
"She just needs a little encouragement, that's all.
And that's where you guys come in."

"Uh-oh," Matt said, shaking his head. "I have
a feeling I'm not gonna like this."

"I need you guys to build me up a little—you
know, drop some compliments about me when
Markie's around. Make her think I'm charming and
witty and fun and generous."

"You mean, you want us to lie for you?" Sam
asked pointedly.

"Very funny," Sly said, unamused. "No, you
don't have to lie, just exaggerate the truth a little.
Loudly. Okay?"

The four members of the Dreams exchanged
cautious glances. "This could be tough," Jake said.
"I mean, what could I possibly say that would have
the ring of believability?"

"Don't worry," Sly assured him. "If you need
suggestions, I'll write some up for you."

"I guess we could give it a try," Matt said with a
shrug. "But, Sly, are you sure this is what you want?"

"Am I sure this is—of course I'm sure!" Sly
said. "What kind of a question is that?"

"I mean, are you sure Markie's really worth all
this effort?" Matt asked. "Maybe she's not the girl
for you."

"Matthew," Sly said, regarding his friend with
open concern, "are you feeling okay? Have you laid
eyes on Markie Malone? Guys, this girl is my ticket
to heaven!"

"Whatever you say, Sly," Sam said dubiously.
"It's just a little weird, that's all. A person shouldn't
have to work this hard to get someone to go out with
them."

"Nonsense," Sly retorted. "This is not work.
This is a challenge. Now remember, guys, you
promised. A lot of compliments—and make sure she
hears you."

• • •

Things worked out pretty well for Tony on Monday
and Tuesday. The dogs behaved like, well, like dogs.

He walked one, then walked another, and so on until he was done. And he liked the feel of that first hundred dollars in his pocket. He was sure it was the start of something big. He even began counting up how many days it would take until he could get his Pearl drums.

There was only one problem. Walking these dogs took way too long. They all wanted to stop at every tree, every fire hydrant, and every telephone pole. And if they saw another dog, well, they had to stop and sniff each other forever while Tony tapped his foot and stared at his watch. By the time Tony got home in the evening, it was way past dinner, and he had to eat and do his homework at the same time.

So on Wednesday, Tony decided to try something different. A little innovation, a little R and D, a little twist of originality, a little Wicks flair. When Tony had first seen the spunky kid with the freckled face and the wad of dough, he'd been walking a whole lot of dogs at once. Only now did it occur to Tony that those dogs might not all be from the same household. He could do all his duties in one long, circular walk from house to house, cutting his working hours to a fraction!

He cursed himself for not thinking of it before. But, rubbing the blisters he'd gotten on his hands over the first two days, he told himself that it was a case of better late than never and walked off to pick up his first charge.

"Howdy, Maurice," he said to the Saint Bernard as he led it out into the street and toward house number two. "We're gonna take a little tour today, and you're gonna meet some buddies. Be nice now." Maurice gave him a calm, doleful look. "Atta boy," Tony said, smiling. "You've got the idea."

Next he picked up Tango, an Afghan who insisted on sniffing every blade of grass he passed. Shaughnessy, a drooling Irish setter, was the third canine to be picked up. After Shaughnessy, there was Clyde, a huge black Labrador retriever who nearly knocked Tony over in his enthusiasm for a walk. And finally, Tony picked up Aleksei, a humongous brute of a Russian wolfhound who growled at the other dogs whenever they got too friendly with him.

Tony paraded down the street, working hard to keep his dogs together. They all seemed to want to pull in different directions at the same time. And between them, they had to weigh at least a ton! Thinking back, Tony seemed to recall that the dogs the kid was walking were a lot more cooperative.

Well, at least Tony's dogs weren't pulling on their leashes all in the same direction! The various pulls and tugs seemed to cancel each other out—sort of. Still, his hands ached. *I'll have to wear some work gloves tomorrow*, he thought, moving the leashes to his other hand. *If my hands survive until then.*

But Tony's troubles had not even begun. At that precise moment, he heard a loud meow come from his

left, followed by hissing sounds. Tony's leashes all went taut at once as canine instinct leaped to the fore.

"Now, Maurice," Tony warned as the Saint Bernard bayed loudly. "Alexei?" The Russian wolfhound let out an ominous growl. Tango sniffed eagerly, Shaughnessy drooled, and Clyde, excited beyond measure, stood up on his two hind legs.

"Guys, take it easy, okay?" Tony pleaded. "It's only a cat, you know?"

The dogs didn't seem to be listening. With a furious chorus of barks, the five canines were off at a bound—with Tony racing at breakneck speed just to stay on his feet and hold on to their leashes.

"Stop!" Tony shouted as he ran with the pack. "Whoa! Halt! Good doggies—*nice* doggies!! Whoa-whoooa!!"

Tony's feet lost contact with the ground as the cat, then the dogs, veered sharply to the left, never breaking stride. Tony landed hard on the ground, but he refused to let go of those leashes.

As a result, he was dragged across a grassy lawn, his body digging a shallow trench as he went. He barely avoided some plaster statuary, a bunch of mailboxes, and a sign offering luxury condos.

But his sigh of relief was cut short when he saw the cat duck into a row of hedges up ahead. The dogs leaped over the hedges, which were cut extremely short. But Tony had nowhere to go. He crashed into the hedges, then was pulled right through them!

He didn't even feel the leashes escape his grasp. He only knew that when he got to his feet, the dogs were gone. They seemed to have scattered in all directions.

He was sore, so sore. . . . Tony felt himself all over to make sure none of his bones were broken, then started brushing off the dirt that caked his clothes.

His brilliant idea had already gone sour. It was going to take him forever to round up all the big mutts and get them home. Sighing, Tony turned toward the street. Then he heard a sound that positively chilled his blood.

"My lawn—my beautiful lawn! Ethel! Harry! Get out here and look at this!"

Tony looked up to see that familiar bald-headed man coming toward him, with murder in his goggled eyes. "You!" the old man shrieked. "You again! It wasn't enough you massacred our hedges? You had to come back here and finish the job?!"

Tony could not believe it. Incredibly, impossibly, out of all the places in Redondo Beach, those stupid dogs had dragged him right through Desert Bloom Luxury Condos!

Ethel, Harry, and a half dozen or so other residents of the condo complex now surrounded Tony, their arms flailing, their voices raised in shock and anger.

"Sorry—I'm s-s-sorry—" Tony stammered, searching desperately for a way out of there.

"There are wild dogs running around all over the place!" Ethel told her neighbors.

"He brought them!" Harry shouted, pointing an accusing finger at Tony. "Somebody call the police!"

Several of the residents headed back inside—presumably to call the cops—and that provided Tony with the opening he needed. "I've got to go round up my dogs!" he shouted, pointing over the shoulders of the angry residents.

Before any of them could react, Tony burst through the circle of people surrounding him, getting out of there as fast as he could.

It took him two hours to find all five of his dogs and get them home to their owners. Luckily, most were thrilled that he'd given their pets such a nice, long walk.

But Tony was far from thrilled. He swore then and there that he would never walk another dog again. "Animals were never my kind of thing anyway," he told himself. "They don't listen when you tell them what to do. No, Wicks, you've been in the wrong line of work. You're a *people* person, not a pet person. Yeah, that's it!"

Suddenly, in a flash, he saw it: the job that was made just for him. The one job he hadn't tried yet.

"Baby-sitting!"

Chapter 8

"**H**ey, Sly! Wait up!"

Sly looked over his shoulder as he walked down the hallway toward the gym. Stu Malone was trotting toward him, looking as awkward as usual.

"Not now, big guy," Sly said, waving him off. He was sure the dweeb wanted him to come over to his house again and study math.

"I forgot to tell you something!" Stu panted, out of breath as he reached Sly. "It's about Markie. But if you don't have time right now, it can wait."

"Don't be silly, Stu!" Sly assured him, doing a quick one-eighty and putting a friendly arm around Stu's shoulder. "I always have time for my pals! Now what was it you wanted to tell me about your sister?"

"Well, remember, you asked me what kind of guys she liked?" Stu asked.

"I seem to remember something like that," Sly said casually. "And . . . ?"

"Well, I've been thinking about it, and I realized that she likes guys who are really muscle-y."

"Really what?"

"You know, with big muscles. She had this one boyfriend—ick, it was gross—and she used to feel his muscles, like this." Stu made a big show out of ogling his own puny biceps. "I just thought you might like to know," he finished with a shrug.

"Stu, my man," Sly said, unable to suppress a triumphant smile, "you are a prince among men. Yes, thank you. I think you've just given me the key to unlock the golden door."

"Well, good luck," Stu said. "But I warn you—Markie's a real jerk. She's not at all like you and me."

"I realize that," Sly assured him. "No, she's not at all like me—and she's certainly nothing like you. In fact, it's hard to believe you two are twins."

"Thanks," Stu said, nodding. "We're fraternal."

"Huh?"

"Nonidentical," he explained, "thank goodness."

"I hear you, brother," Sly agreed. "I hear you."

When Stu had gone, Sly's mind began to whir at top speed. *So, Markie likes musclemen? I can do that!*

Making a muscle, Sly generously judged the

present condition of his biceps to be well above average. But of course he had no intention of letting it go at that. If Markie wanted muscles, she was going to get them—in a big way!

"Hey, Mookie!" Sly called out, catching a glimpse of the back of Mookie Arbuckle's musclebound head. "Can I talk to you for a minute?" Mookie was a nice guy, but there wasn't much rattling around between his ears.

"Sure, Sly," Mookie said, grinning at him stupidly. "What's up?"

"I was just wondering," Sly said. "You've got such a great physique. . . ."

"Great what?" Mookie asked.

"Great muscles," Sly explained patiently.

"Oh yeah. Thanks," Mookie said, striking a pose.

"So, tell me, Mookie. Where do you work out?"

"Me? Um, over on Casey Street."

"Where on Casey Street?"

"Huh? Oh, at the Horizontal Club," Mookie told him.

"And you like it?"

"Oh yeah," Mookie said, nodding happily. "They got lots of weights there."

"Uh-huh," Sly said. "And how much does it cost, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Uh, I don't know," Mookie told him. "I just give them some money every once in a while. I never

really figured it out. Hey, you want a guest pass? I got one right in my wallet here."

"Wow! Most excellent, dude!" Sly exclaimed, slapping Mookie on the back so hard that anyone else would have been knocked over. Mookie, though, didn't even notice. He handed Sly the guest pass, and said, "Here. Just give them this, and tell them Mookie sent you."

"I'll do that, amigo," Sly said, pocketing the pass. "See you at the club, huh?"

"Club?" Mookie asked dumbly. "What club?"

"Oh brother," Sly murmured under his breath. "Never mind. See you later, Mookie."

* * *

As soon as school let out that day, Sly headed over to Casey Street. If he planned to impress Markie Malone, he was going to have to bulk up in a hurry—before some rockhead walked onto the scene and swept her away in his overdeveloped arms.

The guy behind the desk at the Horizontal Club had arms that were thicker than Sly's legs. "I'm Rex," he said. "What can I do for you?"

When Sly presented the guest pass, Rex reached out to shake his hand. "Follow me, and I'll show you around the place."

He led Sly first to the locker room, where Sly changed into sweats, and then upstairs to the ultra-modern gym.

"This is our running track, and here we have stationary bikes," Rex started explaining, but Sly cut him off.

"I'm interested in the weights," he told the guide. "Just weights. I want to bulk up, and I want to do it in a hurry."

"Well, okay," Rex said, raising an eyebrow. "But it's best to take these things slowly. You're liable to injure yourself trying to build muscle too fast."

"Sure, sure," Sly brushed him off. "I understand all that. Just show me the weights, okay? I can take it from there."

"Whatever you say," Rex said, shrugging. "You're the boss. When you're done, though, you might want to have a soak in the whirlpool to keep your muscles from tightening up."

"The weights, Rex," Sly prompted him.

"Here we are," Rex replied, leading Sly around a corner to a hidden part of the large gym.

All around Sly were hulking rockheads and musclebound girls, lifting weights that were bigger than he was. Grunts filled the air, and the smell of sweat was overwhelming.

"I'll just leave you here, then," Rex said. "When you're done, come see me, and I'll tell you about our special six-month trial membership."

"What's so special about it?" Sly asked.

"Well, it's half the normal price, plus if you

change your mind within thirty days, we'll refund your money, no questions asked."

"Really?" Sly asked, not quite willing to believe his good fortune. "I'll take it!"

"Wow! Just like that?" Rex asked.

"Just like that," Sly said.

"I haven't even told you how much it costs," Rex pointed out.

"It doesn't matter," Sly told him. "My dad will cover the cost."

"Great. I'll go draw up the forms," Rex said with a big smile. "Have a nice workout."

Sly waved after him, then turned to face the weights. This had turned out better than he could have dreamed! In thirty days, he'd have muscles as big as Schwarzenegger's, and when he demanded his money back, no one would want to mess with him! His dad would never miss the money before it was returned to his drawer, and Markie would drop dead when she saw the new, hunky Sly Winkle!

"Now, let me at those weights!" he said aloud, rubbing his hands together. "A week from now, my friends won't even recognize me!"

Next to him, a guy with a ponytail and muscles like boulders was lifting a gigantic set of weights. His face was red and his cheeks bulged with the effort. Then he threw the weights down on the floor in front of him with a loud grunt.

"Whoa!" Sly said, stepping back fleet-footedly. "You just missed me there, pal!"

"Yeah?" The guy could not have been less interested.

"Say, uh, what do you call those weights you just lifted?" Sly asked him, trying to get a pointer or two.

"A dumbbell," the guy said.

"Well, hey, same to you," Sly said huffily, reaching for the weights himself.

The guy stopped him. "You're not gonna lift those!" he said.

"Oh no? Watch me," Sly retorted, bending down and grabbing the bar. With a deep breath, he strained to lift them.

They didn't budge.

Sly grunted and groaned until he thought his head would explode, but the weights did not move a millimeter. Putting everything he had into the lift, Sly stood up with a loud shout, but his hands were empty. The dumbbell was still on the floor.

"Say, these are kind of heavy, huh?" Sly said, pointing nonchalantly at the weights. "Do they have anything, uh, lighter around here?"

The guy with the muscles and ponytail didn't answer. Instead, he walked away, returning a few seconds later with a pair of disks that were much thinner and smaller than the ones Sly had tried to lift. Silently, the guy removed the heavier weights

from the bar and replaced them with this new set.

"Try those," he grunted, stepping back and folding his hands across his chest. "They're wimp-sized."

Sly debated whether to try a comeback to the rockhead's snide remark and thought better of it. He never picked on anyone remotely near his own size—and this guy was about *twice* his size.

Instead, Sly bent down to lift the lighter weights. To his great surprise, even these were almost unmoveable. With a superhuman effort, he managed to get them as far as his shoulders. Then he nearly fell to the floor trying to put them down.

"I don't think you're ready for free weights yet," the ponytailed guy said. "Try some of the automated machines. They adjust to your, uh, strength." He chuckled quietly.

In spite of the humiliation, Sly decided to try out the automated machines. Sure enough, he was able to work them. But after about ten minutes his arms and legs hurt so badly they felt like they were falling off.

It will all be worth it in the end, he told himself. "Just keep saying it over and over: Markie likes muscles. . . . Markie likes muscles. . . ."

* * *

Tony had wasted no time getting his latest venture off the ground. Thursday after school, and again on

Friday, he scoured the streets of Redondo Beach, putting up brand-new flyers.

Well, not new, exactly. Before taking this new batch to the copy shop, he'd just covered over the animals and the "dog-walking" part, and turned "pet-sitting" into "baby-sitting." Instead of "Pet Purr-fect," his business was now referred to as "Kid-Perfect." Not exactly brilliant, Tony realized. But for five dollars an hour, he figured he didn't have to be brilliant—just available.

It was now six o'clock on Friday, and he'd just gotten home. He ran upstairs to count his money once more before dinner. Yup. A hundred dollars—the figure hadn't changed for two days. Still, it wasn't bad, considering all the stuff that had gone down so far.

True, he'd already run through almost every job he could possibly get. But never mind that. It should only be a matter of time before his baby-sitting flyers were noticed. And although five dollars an hour wasn't exactly great money, it was what baby-sitters got these days, and it would have to do.

Anyhow, at least he felt confident he could handle the job. Tony knew he was good with kids because his little girl cousins loved playing with him whenever they came to visit. They never gave him any problems, and—unlike dogs—they understood English and did whatever you told them to do.

Just as Tony was about to go downstairs for din-

ner, the phone rang. He dove onto his bed and picked up the receiver. "Hello, Kid-Perfect!" he said, just in case it was a job call.

And sure enough, it was! "Hi," a woman's harried voice said. "I just lost my regular babysitter, and I need one right away, for tonight! Do you think you could possibly get somebody down here by seven o'clock?"

"Uh, let me check my book," Tony said, playing it cool. This woman sounded frantic, and he wanted to play the moment for all it was worth.

"I'll pay extra!" the woman pleaded. "Please, I've got to have somebody."

"As a matter of fact, ma'am," Tony told her, "my very best sitter happens to be free. His name is Tony Wicks. Shall I send him over?"

"Oh, thank you so much!" the woman said, sounding relieved. "It's Harrelson, 149 Willow Way."

"Very good, ma'am. I'll pass that along."

"Uh, listen, just tell him that my kids are very nice, but they're . . . well, they're kind of a challenge."

"No problem, ma'am," Tony assured her. "Tony Wicks has a way with children."

"I'm so glad to hear that," Mrs. Harrelson said. "Because I just can't hold on to a sitter lately. My son and daughter are very bright and creative—"

"Bright and creative?" Tony echoed.

"Well, yes—I guess you could even call them difficult."

"Difficult?"

"Oh, look, I'll pay seven-fifty," Mrs. Harrelson pleaded. "Just send him!"

"Seven-fifty it is!" Tony said, giving his pillow a high five. "I'll—I mean, he'll—be right over!"

Tony raced downstairs, wolfed down his food, and got on his bike to head over to Willow Way. He could hardly believe his good fortune. He hadn't even asked for extra money, and the woman had practically insisted that he take seven-fifty an hour!

Well, he wasn't going to object to the extra money. No way!

As he rode down the street, he did wonder why Mrs. Harrelson had been so eager to up his rate. But Tony guessed that it was just because it was such a last-minute thing.

Sure, she'd said the kids were difficult. But for a few hours, Tony figured he could handle them. Kids were easier than dogs, after all. Weren't they?

Chapter 9

Tony sized up the house, trying to get a feel for what he was in for. *Nice place, quiet street, good vibes.* This is going to be a piece of cake, he told himself as he secured his bike to a street sign and rang the doorbell.

It was answered by a tall, nice-looking woman in her thirties, who immediately invited him inside.

"I'm Jody Harrelson," she said, giving him a big smile. She sounded a little breathless but seemed really happy to see him. "You must be Tony."

"That's right, ma'am."

"Well, your boss sure had some nice things to say about you over the phone," she said warmly.

"We get along pretty well," Tony told her smugly.

"I'm so, so glad you could make it, Tony, because I have to meet Mr. Harrelson in L.A., and I was afraid

I wasn't going to be able to get anyone. Can you imagine—my regular babysitter calls me at six o'clock to tell me she's quitting!"

"That's incredible," Tony remarked sympathetically. "Some people have no sense of responsibility!"

"I like the way you think," Mrs. Harrelson said, getting her jacket out of the closet. "This is going to work out just great, I can tell. And listen, about the money . . ."

Uh-oh. Was she going to try to renegotiate now that he'd already shown up?

"I realize it's a lot, but if things go well tonight, I'm willing to pay you that much on a regular basis. It's so hard to get somebody who's really compatible with my kids."

"Oh, I love kids!" Tony assured her. For seven-fifty an hour, he was totally crazy about them. "Speaking of which," he added, "where are the little darlings?"

Mrs. Harrelson rolled her eyes. "Probably thinking up some mischief or other," she guessed. "Like I told your boss, they're very creative. But let's go find them. I want to make sure you're properly introduced before I leave."

She led him through the living room, picking up assorted toys as she went—one of which was the videocassette cover for the movie *Home Alone*.

"It's their favorite movie," Mrs. Harrelson said with a sigh. "They must have seen it a hundred

times. But if you don't mind, I'd rather they don't watch TV tonight. They see too much as it is."

"Don't worry, I'm sure we can think up lots of other things to do," Tony assured her. "You said they were very creative."

"True," Mrs. Harrelson agreed after thinking about it. "Of course, if things really get out of hand, do whatever you think is best. Oh, and I can be reached at the number I left by the kitchen phone."

"No problem. I'm sure everything will be just fine. I've never, ever had any problems on a baby-sitting job." Well, that was true, at least. He'd never actually had a baby-sitting job, so how could he have had a problem?

The clumping of little sneakered feet sounded on the stairs. "Here they come now," Mrs. Harrelson said, turning to greet her children.

Tony turned, too, involuntarily bracing himself to be ready for anything. But to his surprise and delight, the boy and girl who now appeared seemed refreshingly normal.

"This is Mike—he's nine, and this is Melissa—she'll be eight in December. Children, this is Tony. He'll be your baby-sitter tonight."

"Hi, Tony," Mike said, smiling and extending his hand.

"Nice to meet you," Melissa said, giving him a little wave.

"Hey, I'm glad to meet you two guys!" Tony said, really starting to feel in the groove.

"Now, you children behave yourselves," Mrs. Harrelson said apprehensively. "Tony, since tomorrow's Saturday, you don't have to put them to bed early. I'd say nine o'clock is good enough, nine-thirty the absolute latest."

"You got it, Mrs. H.," Tony said, making the okay sign with his fingers. "Yo, Mike and Melissa, you ready to party?"

The children smiled and giggled happily, exchanging glances before saying, "Yeah!" in unison.

"Well, bye, everybody," Mrs. Harrelson said, giving her kids quick kisses on the forehead. "Tony, we'll be back by midnight at the latest."

"Take your time, ma'am," he replied, meaning every word. The later they came back, the more money he'd have in his pocket.

The door closed behind Mrs. Harrelson, and a second later a bloodcurdling "Wa-hoo!!" erupted from behind Tony. He whirled around only to find Mike and Melissa scooting past him on either side and disappearing back upstairs.

Tony chuckled to himself. "High-spirited little tykes," he said aloud as he made for the stairs. "Probably in the middle of some game when I showed up."

As he turned the landing, he heard the sound of conspiratorial giggling upstairs. These guys were

really cute! Tony swung around the landing—

And nearly did a back flip as his foot went out from under him! Tony grabbed his lower back in a sudden spasm of pain, but at least he'd stayed upright.

What was that he'd tripped on, anyway? Looking down, Tony saw that it was not one but a dozen or so tiny cars, which had totally covered the first step. He'd fallen right into the trap and stepped on them.

"You know, kids, I could have gotten hurt like that!" Tony protested, skipping the treacherous step and continuing on up. "That's a dangerous th—hey!" Tony felt his hand sticking to the banister. He didn't know what the substance was, but it was definitely gross in a big way.

"Tee-hee-hee!" came the laughter from upstairs.

"Uproarious, dudes," Tony congratulated them, trying to keep his good humor. "Very funny. I hope this stuff comes off with soap and water, whatever it is."

Mike and Melissa appeared from a second-floor doorway, looking sheepish. They seemed pretty sorry for what they'd done. "Thanks for not yelling at us," Melissa said, biting down on her index finger adorably.

"Yeah, you're pretty nice," Mike agreed. "Wanna play with us?"

"Sure! Sure thing!" Tony said, feeling that he'd won them over.

After Tony had washed his hands, Mike and Melissa led him into their playroom and sat him in a chair. "So, dudes," Tony said, "what are we playing?"

"We're playing hostage," Mike informed him.

"Let me guess," Tony said. "I get to be the hostage, and you're the kidnappers, right?"

"He's smart, too," Melissa told her brother. "We won't be able to play any more tricks on him."

"That's right, little lady," Tony said with a big smile.

"Okay," Mike said. "Let's tie him up."

"Whoa! Now, wait a minute!" Tony stopped them. "You don't think I'm gonna let you two tie me up here to this chair when I'm supposed to be looking after you, do you?"

"Hmm," Mike considered this. "Okay, forget tying you up," he said. "Can I at least put you in my Chinese handcuffs?"

"Chinese what?" Tony asked. In response, Mike held up a flexible little tube made out of woven palm leaves or something. It looked totally innocuous.

"Is that the thing you want to put on me?" Tony asked with a laugh. "Go ahead, I'm down with that."

"Okay," Mike said slowly, coming around behind Tony and slipping one end of the tube over Tony's left index finger.

"That tickles!" Tony said, laughing.

The kids laughed, too, and Tony was glad to be able to show them such a good time. Wouldn't Mrs. Harrelson be happy when she came home?

"There," Mike said, slipping the other end of the tube over Tony's right index finger, so that his hands were linked together behind his back. "Now let's tie him up!"

"You little rascal!" Tony said, still smiling as Mike and Melissa reached into their closet and came out with several lengths of rope. "All right, that's the end of this game."

He tried to pull his fingers out of the little tube, but the Chinese handcuffs held his fingers fast. Tony yanked harder and harder, a sense of panic welling up inside him as Mike began winding the rope around his ankles.

"Now, wait just a second. Hang on, you two—hey, don't do that!"

While Tony struggled, trying to pry his fingers free, Mike finished tying his ankles to the legs of the chair and Melissa wound another length of rope around Tony's arms and body.

"Use a clove hitch," Mike told his sister. "And add a half hitch at the end. He'll never get loose. Heh, heh, heh . . ."

"Gotcha," Melissa said, following his instructions.

"You kids stop this right now!" Tony ordered.

Mike and Melissa paid no attention, as if he were just another one of their toys. "Hey, quit it, or I'm gonna tell your parents!"

"Tee-hee-hee!" came the reply.

"I said, qu—mphfmbmgh!!" Suddenly, Tony found his mouth covered by a big piece of duct tape.

"And this is how we play hostage!" Mike said gleefully, stepping back to admire his and Melissa's handiwork. A second later, both Harrelson children raced out of the room, leaving Tony sitting in the chair, bound and gagged. He couldn't even get his fingers free, let alone his arms or legs!

Don't panic, he told himself as he heard the kids tramp down the stairs. Think of all the movie heroes you've seen get out of situations just like this. What would Clint do? Or Denzel? Or Arnold?

He started rocking the chair to make it tip over on its side. When it did, his body hit the floor so hard that Tony let out a muffled cry of pain. *How come it never hurts like that in the movies?* he wondered.

The rope around his ankles had come loose a bit, and soon Tony had worked free of it. Now at least he could walk, although it was hard because the chair was still strapped to his aching back. He was all stooped over.

Tony heard voices coming from the kitchen downstairs. Cold sweat trickled down his face, tickling him and driving him crazy until he rubbed his face hard against the door sill.

Okay, he had to get down to the kitchen and lay down the law to these kids. They were going to set him free, and after cleaning up the mess on the banister, he was going to send them straight to bed. *No more of this Home Alone stuff*, he thought.

Tony came to a dead stop at the top of the stairs. A few feet below him was the step with all the cars on it. No way could he hop down past it. He was just going to have to brave his way down the steps, holding on to the sticky banister for dear life.

From downstairs, Tony heard screams of delight. Melissa and Mike were stirring up more trouble, no doubt. He had to get down there and get those kids under control!

Tony turned his back to the banister and stopped trying to get out of the Chinese handcuffs, so that he could grab the rail with his free fingers. Miraculously, the handcuffs loosened, allowing him to get his fingers apart!

Tony ripped the duct tape from his mouth and freed himself from the chair. A moment later he was in the kitchen. The place was a total pigsty, but Mike and Melissa had already moved on. Tony heard noises coming from the basement. He raced down there, only to find Mike and Melissa calmly doing the laundry!

"We got the tablecloth dirty," Melissa explained.
"So we're cleaning it."

Tony was taken aback. "Oh," he said. "Well,

that's better." His brain told him not to trust these kids for a minute, but Tony was so desperate to get control of the situation that he decided to let bygones be bygones. "Okay. Just get upstairs, clean up the kitchen, pick up your ears, and get that yucky stuff off the banister. Now."

The children obeyed. While they cleaned up their mess, Tony looked around for the telephone number Mrs. Harrelson had left him. He might have been tempted to use it, but Melissa and Mike had already cut off that option. The paper with the number had been torn into at least a hundred pieces!

Tony was on his own for the rest of the night.

"You kids are going to bed early," Tony said, gritting his teeth.

"Yes, Tony," Mike said contritely.

"We're sorry we were naughty," Melissa added.

"And no more funny stuff," Tony told them, when the kitchen was back in order as he led them both back upstairs to their rooms. Mike and Melissa seemed in no hurry as they picked up their cars and towed off the banister, but they didn't hold things up, either. Every once in a while, a small giggle would erupt from one or the other.

It was at this point that Tony began to get suspicious. Directing them both into their beds, he shut off their lights, closed their doors, and stood there on the landing, wondering what they were up to now. They'd gone to bed way too easily.

Something, some sixth sense, drew him like a magnet back down to the basement. And there, to his horror, Tony realized he'd been duped again. The washing machine was still running, belching mountains of suds like a volcano. Soapy lava covered half the basement floor!

With a groan of frustration, Tony slogged through the sea of bubbles and turned off the machine. The container of laundry detergent had been emptied into the washer, and good old Mike and Melissa had set the machine to run its longest possible wash cycle.

Heaving a tortured sigh as the giggles erupted again from upstairs, Tony finally lost his temper. "You kids get your sorry selves down here and clean this up—*now!!!*"

Hours later—or was it years?—Mr. and Mrs. Harrelson arrived back at their house. Mike and Melissa were blissfully asleep—or at least, they were pretending to be. And Tony? Tony was collapsed in front of the television set, staring at the home shopping channel lady as she sold jewelry to insomniac housewives.

"Hi!" Mrs. Harrelson chirped. "My, it's quiet around here! How'd it go?"

"Oh, fine . . . fine . . .," Tony said weakly, forcing a smile, though every muscle in his body ached from weariness and numerous blows. "I'll be going now."

"Wait!" Mrs. Harrelson said. "Don't you want your money?"

"Oh . . . that. . . ." Tony reached out his hand, and she plunked forty dollars into it.

"I'm so glad you could make it, Tony," she said. "Maybe we can do this again next week."

"Uh, no! I'm, uh, very busy next week. In fact, I just heard that I got a legacy. My rich uncle died and left me his farm in Indiana. I'm leaving in the morning and I won't be coming back—ever!"

Mrs. Harrelson looked shocked and disappointed. "I'm so sorry to hear that, Tony," she said sadly. "It's so hard to find a good baby-sitter like you."

Tony stepped out the door and went to unlock his bike. His body felt like it was a hundred years old. But that wasn't the worst of it: The worst thing was his sense of utter failure. Tony had come to the end of the road. No more brilliant ideas for money making. No more jobs lay in his future.

And the set of Pearl drums, the drums he'd busted his chops for, was going to be a dream that never, never came true.

Chapter 10

The next morning, Tony awoke early. His body, although he would not have believed it possible, hurt him even worse than the night before.

After breakfast, his dad asked him to go down to the 7-Eleven for him and pick up some milk. And it was there that Tony ran into Sly.

Sly was walking with great care, wincing at every step and huffing and blowing with the effort of doing anything at all.

"Hey, man," Tony greeted him. "It's not funny. Stop imitating me. I hurt *bad*."

"I'm not imitating anybody," Sly moaned. "My body is one big aching muscle."

"Man, I hear you," Tony said, nodding. "Have you been baby-sitting too?"

"Huh?" Sly asked, confused. "No, I've been lifting weights. Tons of them."

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"What for?" Tony asked, surprised. Working out was not exactly one of Sly's hobbies.

"Never mind," Sly said, waving off the question. "Hey, I've got an idea. Want to join me at the health club for a hot soak in the whirlpool? I've got a guest pass."

"All right!" Tony said, smiling wistfully at the very idea. "That sounds like a little piece of heaven!"

Forgetting about what they'd come to buy, the two friends headed off to the Horizontal Club in Sly's dad's car and soon found themselves immersed in bubbling hot water.

"Man, you're smarter than I gave you credit for," Tony said, his eyes half closed. "This is bodaious!"

"I should have thought of this the other day," Sly said, sighing. "I'm through with weight lifting. Too much work. Too much pain."

"It beats baby-sitting," Tony told him. "Hey, how's it going with Markie?"

"Just a matter of time, my man," Sly assured him, wincing in pain. "Just a matter of time."

"By the way," Tony said sadly. "You win the bet. I'm gonna quit trying to get those drums."

"Sorry to hear that," Sly said sympathetically. "Sure you aren't giving up too easily?"

"Sylvester," Tony said, levelling his gaze at Sly, "you have no idea what I've been through."

"Tony," Sly shot back, "life hasn't exactly been a strawberry picnic for me, either. But I stick to what I

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said: Markie Malone is going to fall for me. And the more she makes me work, the harder her fall's going to be."

"Maybe so, Sylvester," Tony said, shaking his head. "All I can say is, I hope things work out better for you than they did for me."

"They will," Sly assured him. "They will."

* * *

It was around lunchtime when Tony trudged sadly into Sharkey's and plopped himself down at the table where the rest of the members of California Dreams were gathered.

His body felt much better after the long soak, but his heart was heavy—so heavy that he could barely lift his gaze off the floor. He answered his friends' greetings with a barely audible grunt.

"Poor Tony!" Tiffani gasped, setting down her milk shake. "What happened to you?"

"I guess your pet care job hasn't been going too great, huh?" Sam asked, looking concerned.

"I gave that up," Tony told her. "I've been baby-sitting, but I'm through with that, too."

"Gee, Tony," Matt said sympathetically. "That's a shame."

"Don't worry, man," Jake told him. "You still sound good, even on that crummy old drum set of yours."

"Don't remind me," Tony moaned. "It's too painful."

Just then, Markie Malone came through the

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front door of the restaurant, trailed by two surfer dudes with adoring smiles plastered on their faces. She took a table just across from the Dreams and picked up a menu.

The Dreams exchanged furtive glances. "Ahem," Matt said, clearing his throat. "Yes, and we owe it all to Sly."

"He really is the greatest," Samantha said, loudly enough for Markie to hear but not so loud that it was obvious the words were for her benefit. "Friends like him are few and far between."

"He's so cute, too," Tiffani added. "It's amazing he doesn't have a steady girlfriend."

Tony looked from one of them to the other. "What are you guys talking about?" he asked, stupefied. "Is this Sylvester we're discussing?"

Jake put a quick finger to his lips, signaling Tony to be silent. "Sly's really got something going," he said. "I wish I were as cool as he is."

"Don't we all?" Matt agreed, casting a sidelong glance at Markie. She had lowered her menu and was glancing their way curiously.

"He's smart, funny, cute, and a real true friend," Samantha said, sighing dramatically. "We really should do more to show our gratitude—maybe throw him a party or something."

"Great idea!" Matt said. "Oh, hi, Markie," he said, giving her a little wave as she caught him looking her way.

"Hi." Markie waved back with a half-hearted

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smile. She knitted her eyebrows in thought, seemingly disturbed by something. Suddenly she got up and tossed her menu down on the table. Turning to her two male companions, she said, "I'm not hungry after all. Come on, let's go Rollerblading."

She led her entourage out of Sharkey's. No sooner had the door swung closed behind them than Tony said, "All right, people. You want to tell me what that was all about?"

"Sure," Jake said, "Sly asked us to say nice things about him in front of Markie."

"And you agreed?" Tony asked, incredulous. "Man, where's your integrity? How could you lie like that?"

"He's getting us the South Coast Arts Festival gig, right?" Samantha put in, flipping her dark hair over her shoulder. "What's the big deal? If he wants to go out with Markie so badly, what harm can it do? She'll find out soon enough what a slimeball Sly is."

Just then, Sly came walking into the restaurant. "How's it going, guys?" he asked. "Notice my new muscles?" He posed for them, showing off his biceps.

"Not really," Samantha said, shaking her head. "Hey, you just missed Markie."

"I did?" Sly asked, his face pained. "Rats!"

"Don't worry, dude," Tony assured him. "They talked you up a whole lot."

"Great!" Sly said, slapping Jake and Matt on the shoulders appreciatively. "Thanks, guys."

"It's the least we could do," Jake said, "since

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you're getting us that big gig at the arts festival." He gave Sly a meaningful glance. "It is in the bag, right?"

"The . . . the . . . arts festival . . .," Sly stammered. *That's* what he had forgotten! "Oh—oh, yeah!! The arts festival!! Sure, sure—in the bag . . . in the . . ." He ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Uh, guys, I just remembered something. I've gotta run. Bye!"

And before any of them could stop him, he had disappeared out the front door of the restaurant.

When he was gone, Tony sighed and pulled the wad of money he'd earned out of his pocket. "Well, I may be unemployed, but at least I made some money for all my trouble. One hundred forty dollars," he said sadly, counting it up.

"Hey!" Tiffani said encouragingly. "That's great, Tony! I mean, you've only done a few days' work, and look how much you've gotten for it!"

"Yeah," Tony acknowledged, not at all consoled. "But I've had about all I can take. Sylvester was right. That drum set is never going to be mine."

Tony got up slowly, just as Stu Malone arrived at their table with five glasses of water on his tray. One of them tipped over, soaking Tony's T-shirt.

"Sorry, Tony!" Stu said, trying to dry him off with a rag and almost spilling the other glasses of water in the process. "I don't know why this keeps happening."

"It's okay, Stu," Tony said, resigned. "Nothing else could happen that would bother me now." Without even saying good-bye, Tony walked slowly

out of the restaurant, leaving Stu and the Dreams staring after him.

"Wow!" Samantha said, her eyes wide with shock. "I've never seen Tony so down!"

"Yeah," Matt agreed. "I never thought I'd see the day when Tony Wicks would leave a hundred forty dollars of his own money behind!"

Jake picked up the money. "No, Stu, this is not your tip," he told Sharkey's nephew, whose eyes had bugged out at the sight of the money on the table. Stu took their orders and raced off, summoned by a pair of annoyed customers at another table.

"This is awful!" Tiffani said, shaking her head.

"We've got to do something to help Tony!"

"But what?" Matt asked, leaning back against his chair.

Jake thought hard. "What Tony needs is that set of Pearl drums," he said. "And we've got to see that he gets them!"

"But how?" Samantha asked. "I don't have any money. Do you guys?"

The Dreams all shrugged and shook their heads. "If Twinkle would get us the gig at the arts festival, we might be able to pool our take and get Tony the drums," Jake suggested.

"We can't wait that long," Samantha said. "Besides, do you really believe that Sly's going to get us that gig?"

Jake shook his head, and so did the others. "He was just blowing hot air, as usual," Jake said.

"There's got to be *something* we can do to help Tony," Sam insisted.

"It's not just about the drums," Matt pointed out. "Tony needs his self-respect back, too, and that means a job he can be successful at."

Tiffani stared over at Stu Malone as he dumped an order of fries onto the floor. "You're absolutely right, Matt," she said. "Guys, I have a great idea."

The Dreams huddled together conspiratorially. "I'm going to take Tony's money over to Iggy's Music Store," Tiffani said. "Iggy's always kind of liked me, and maybe I can work something out with him. In the meantime . . ." Whispering quietly, she told them the rest of her plan.

"Gee, Tiffani," Matt said. "I don't know. I think I'd feel bad for Stu. I mean, he's a nice guy."

"I know," Tiffani said. "But so's Tony. And which of them is better suited for being a waiter?"

"I see your point," Matt said, looking up apprehensively as Stu approached with their burgers, balancing their tray with great difficulty. "Here, let me help you with that," he told Stu, taking the tray from him.

"Uhh . . . thanks," Stu said, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Whew. There's got to be an easier way to make a living." Shaking his head, Sharkey's nephew loped back toward the kitchen.

"You know," Samantha said, as Tiffani took Tony's money from Jake and got up to go. "I think we'll actually be doing Stu a favor!"

"Stu! Come here, man!" Jake called out.
Stu dutifully came back to their table, looking curious.

"Have a seat," Jake told him, pulling out a chair.
Stu sat. "What's up, guys?" he asked.

"Well," Samantha began, "we were talking about what you just said, and we think maybe you're right. Maybe waiting tables isn't the job for you."

"Yeah," Stu agreed. "But I like having the extra cash."

"You could get another job," Samantha said.
"There are lots of other jobs you'd be great at."

"There are?" Stu asked. "Like what?"

"Stu, I'm surprised at you," Jake said. "A guy like you, with so much potential, so many abilities . . ."

"Me?"

"Sure!" Samantha agreed. "Waiting tables is no job for a guy like you! Why should you wait on cranky customers all afternoon? You need to use your talents!"

"I do?" Stu asked.

"Absolutely," Matt told him. "And we'll help you think of a better idea."

Tiffani couldn't suppress a grin as she walked out the door of the restaurant, headed for Iggy's. Her friends were going to show Stu the light, all right. And this was just the beginning!

• • •

Sly raced for the nearest phone booth and fished wildly in his pockets for enough change to call L.A.

How could he have forgotten to call McTaggart back?
How could he have let his friends down like this? He dialed the number, hoping against hope that he wasn't too late!

The first three times he dialed, he got a busy signal. Finally, he got through to Hot Rocks Promotions, only to be put on hold. He stood at the pay phone, tapping his foot impatiently, muttering to himself and shaking his head.

Then he spotted her. Markie was Rollerblading down the paved path along the beach, followed by two hunky blond-haired guys in bathing suits. She was skating pretty fast, like she was trying to get rid of them.

Quickly, Sly hung up the phone. He could call Hot Rocks back a little later. After all, he was already a whole day late getting back to McTaggart. And besides, this might be his big opportunity to get through to Markie!

He ran down the street to Slip 'n' Slide Skate Rentals and got himself a pair of blades. *So what if I've never been on Rollerblades before?* he asked himself. *I've been on regular roller skates, back when I was a little kid. How much different can these be?*

Sly sat down on a bench and laced up. *How ironic, he thought, that after all my travails, life has presented me with the perfect way to win Markie's heart.* He would show her his athletic prowess and demonstrate that the two of them had something in common, all at the same time!

He stood up—and before he knew what had happened, he was sprawled on the pavement! *No problem*, he thought, using the bench to pull himself up again. *These blades just take a little getting used to, that's all.*

"You want me to give you a little help across the street?" the guy at the rental booth called out.

"No thanks," Sly replied, getting up slowly. "Must have caught a wheel on something."

"You'd better rent the helmet," the guy suggested.

At first, Sly had turned down the helmet. He wanted to look macho for Markie. But she was wearing one herself—even though the way she skated, she probably never fell.

"Okay," Sly said, hobbling back over to the booth and pulling on a helmet. As he fastened the strap, he spotted Markie making another pass down the other side of the boulevard. This time she was alone. She must have ditched those two guys. *Perfect!* "Gotta fly," Sly said to the rental guy.

The light changed. Sly somehow made it across the street, doing several unintentional splits and narrowly avoiding more than one surprised pedestrian. Once he was safely across, he took off after Markie.

Before he knew it, he had gotten up a head of steam and was traveling faster than he could ever remember skating on regular roller skates. Now he had Markie in sight. She was just up ahead.

With a rush of speed, Sly breezed past her. "Hi, Markie!" he called out. "Fancy meeting you here!"

He turned his head, to see her reaction. That was his big mistake. Before he knew what was happening, he was headed straight for the stone wall that separated the boulevard from the beach!

"Hey!" he shouted. "Where are the brakes on these things?"

But it was too late. Sly met the wall and did a neat forward flip right over it, landing hard on his back.

Stars floated in front of his vision. Thank goodness he'd landed on the sand, not on concrete. And thank goodness he'd rented that helmet after all!

"Are you okay, Sly?" It was Markie, bending over him, smiling. She seemed to be trying to suppress a laugh at his expense.

"Great," Sly replied. "Never better. Which one of you is you?"

That made Markie giggle. "You really ought to watch where you're going," she remarked.

"Tell me about it," Sly said, struggling to get into a sitting position.

Sly was disgusted with himself. He'd spent ten dollars to rent Rollerblades, just to look like a total geek in front of Markie. What must she think of him now?

"I was wondering," Markie said suddenly, "do you have any plans for tonight?"

"Huh?" Sly could not have been more taken aback. It was the last thing in the world he'd expected her to say.

"'Cause I'm free," Markie went on, "and I thought maybe you'd like to go out someplace."

"Wait," Sly said. "Are you saying you want to go out with me? Just the other day, you said you wouldn't do that if I were the last man on earth!"

"I've been thinking about that," Markie admitted. "It seems like a lot of people think you're a really great guy. I keep hearing people saying good things about you. It made me realize that maybe I'd judged you too harshly. So what do you say?"

"I say all right!" Sly exclaimed exultantly. *Good old California Dreams*, he thought to himself. They'd come through for him, big time!

"I'll be ready at seven," Markie said, hoisting herself back over the low stone wall and blading away. "See you then!"

"Yes!!" Sly said, pumping a triumphant fist into the air. His body felt like that of an eighty-year-old, but he didn't care. He finally had a date with Markie Malone!

Chapter 11

Sly pulled into Markie's driveway at seven, honking the horn of his dad's 1989 Chrysler sedan. When Markie appeared on her doorstep, Sly got out to open the passenger-side door for her. The door stuck. Sly flashed Markie his coolest smile and gave the door a yank. It flew open, banging his shin.

Sly howled in pain, but Markie just giggled. "Sly, you're such a comedian!" she said, getting into the car. Sly bit his tongue to stifle his groans. At least she thought he'd done it on purpose. It would have been pretty humiliating to start off the date on such a geeky note.

But Sly wasn't through, not by a long shot. He'd never thought of himself as clumsy or awkward, but something about being with Markie made a real dweeb out of him. The very next thing he did was

throw the car into reverse instead of drive, kissing the bumper of the car parked behind him.

Then he went the wrong way down a one-way street and had to back all the way out when a car came down it the right way, blocking his path.

"Have you driven a car before?" Markie asked delicately.

"Oh, sure—hundreds of times," Sly told her truthfully. Then he embroidered a bit by adding, "This is my dad's car, though. My Mustang is in the shop."

"You drive a Mustang?" Markie asked, impressed.

"Oh yeah," Sly lied. "I'm used to the stick shift, see. I can't get used to this automatic stuff."

"I thought automatic was easier," Markie said.

"Not for me," Sly said, arching an eyebrow as he screeched to a halt in the parking lot of the French restaurant he'd decided to take her to. "I like doing things the hard way."

"Yes, I picked that up about you," Markie agreed. She looked even more gorgeous than usual tonight. Her red hair fell in luxuriant waves over her bare shoulders, and the teal crushed-velvet dress she wore picked up the green of her enormous eyes. Sly could barely breathe looking at her.

At the table, Markie laughed again when Sly took the linen napkin and tucked it into his collar. "Sly, I never realized you had such a great sense of

humor!" she said, shaking her head in admiration. "I always thought you were just a geek. I guess it goes to show you, you can't go by first impressions."

"You got that right," Sly agreed. "Gargoyle!" he called, summoning the waiter and sending Markie into another fit of giggles. "We'd like to order now."

"Yes, monsieur," the waiter said laconically.

"What would you like, Markie?" Sly asked her. "I realize you said French food was too fattening for you, but I understand this place offers some lighter fare."

"Oh, that's okay," Markie said. "I'm tired of the same old boring stuff," she said. "I'll have the escargots Marseillaise, and the bouillabaisse."

"Sounds good," Sly said, nodding thoughtfully and looking at the menu as if he could read it. "I'll have the same." He handed the menu back to the "gargoyle," and smiled at Markie. "I'm up for a change of pace, too. So tell me," he said, being so bold as to take her hand. "How did somebody as fantastic as you get to have Stu for a twin brother?"

That made Markie laugh even more. "He and I have been fighting since the day we were born. I guess it goes to show you, genes aren't everything. He's a nice enough guy, but—well, you know how annoying you were being all that time you were trying to get me to go out with you?"

"Uh . . . yeah! That! I was just clowning around," Sly said with a shrug.

"Of course, I realize that now," Markie told him. "But that's how Stu is around the house all the time! So awkward and dorky. Funny without meaning to be, you know? It's pathetic."

"It must be hard for him to look at you and realize that his twin got all the looks, brains, and personality," Sly said as the waiter stepped up to the table with their appetizers.

"Now you're flattering me again," Markie said, her green eyes glimmering.

"Impossible," Sly said, half closing his eyes. "You're already perfect. It's impossible to exaggerate perfection."

He looked down at his plate, and nearly gagged right then and there. "Snails!" he gasped. "Gargoyle! What's the meaning of this?"

"You ordered the escargots, monsieur," the waiter said.

"That's right!" Sly said. He was about to demand that the waiter take it back, when he glanced over at Markie and saw her giggle as she stuck a snail into her mouth.

Sly was trapped, and he knew it. With every slimy snail he swallowed, he swore to himself that next time he'd take Markie to an American restaurant, where they served food that might not be fancy but at least wasn't totally gross!

At any rate, the rest of their dinner went all right. In fact, no matter how many geeky things Sly

did, Markie thought he was just being funny!

He took her dancing at Club Red, and his version of the funky chicken had her in stitches. And when she leaned on him to catch her breath, the softness of her skin and hair and the scent of her perfume took Sly's breath away.

On the ride home, Markie actually leaned her head on Sly's shoulder, closing her eyes happily. Sly's heart sounded like a bass drum in the close confines of the car.

"This was really fun," Markie said as Sly pulled up in front of her house. Leaning over, she gave him a long, sizzling kiss.

Sly had to fight to keep from fainting dead away. Her lips were warm and soft, and the scent of her hair as it brushed against his face sent tingles up and down his spine. Never in his life had he come so close to heaven!

"So!" he said as they broke apart, his voice coming out in a squeak. "Can I see you again?"

Markie giggled softly. "Of course you can," she said, smiling her dazzling smile at him. "Sly, I owe you an apology. I judged you too harshly—just because you weren't as good-looking, hunky, sophisticated, or rich as the guys I usually date. But now I realize that you have charms of your own."

"I do?" Sly asked before he could stop himself. "I mean, I do! Of course I do!"

"I'll tell you what," Markie said. "Why don't

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you take me to the South Coast Arts Festival next weekend?"

The South Coast Arts Festival! Hearing those words made Sly feel as if he had been slammed in the head with a sledgehammer. He'd forgotten to call McTaggart back! And after all the Dreams had done for him—getting him this date with Markie.

Sly felt like a complete heel. His best friends in the world were counting on him, and he'd been so smitten with Markie that he'd totally let them down!

"Are you okay, Sly?" Markie asked. "You're white as a sheet!"

"I'm fine!" he assured her. "Here, let me get the door for you!" He dashed out of the car and around to her side, yanking open the door so hard that it hit his shin again in the exact same place.

"Sly, you are the funniest guy I've ever met!" Markie said, giving him a kiss on the cheek as he hopped around in pain. "So what about next weekend?"

"Sounds fine. I'll get back to you about it, okay?" he said, still balancing himself on one foot.

"Okay! Good night, Mr. Comedian," Markie said, waving as she ran up her front walk.

As soon as she had gone inside, Sly got back behind the wheel and raced for home. He had to get to the phone immediately! Maybe Hot Rocks Promotions would be open late and maybe, by some lucky twist of fate, they hadn't made their final decisions yet.

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Sly bit his lip so hard that it hurt. He had to get the Dreams that gig! But he could only hope and pray that he wasn't already too late.

The minute he got home, Sly raced to the phone. But the offices of Hot Rocks Promotions were closed for the day. Instead of the receptionist, a recorded voice came on the line.

"Thank you for calling Hot Rocks Promotions," it said. "If you are calling for a final list of the bands for the South Coast Arts Festival, press one. The list will be published in tomorrow's *L.A. Times*."

Sly hung up, his heart sinking right through the floor. "Oh no!" he moaned, forgetting all about his dream date with Markie. "If the guys find out I blew this gig, I'm dead meat!"

* * *

Monday morning, as soon as the clock struck ten, Sly was on the phone again, trying to get through to Snuffy McTaggart.

McTaggart's secretary firmly informed Sly that the selection of bands was final and that the only way a change would be made was if there was a last-minute cancellation.

But Sly was not about to give up, even if it did mean cutting a day of classes. This was life or death. After first making sure that McTaggart was in his office that day, Sly drove down there, armed with a copy of the Dreams' latest demo tape.

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He arrived at the offices of Hot Rocks Promotions only to find his way blocked by the receptionist, a female bodybuilder with a no-nonsense expression. She told him Mr. McTaggart was in a meeting and couldn't see anyone.

But Sly was in no mood to be turned away empty-handed. He just kept reminding himself that if he wanted something badly enough and kept trying, he was bound to succeed. No matter how many times she told him he'd have to leave, Sly stayed right where he was, patiently explaining to her the critical importance of getting the Dreams' demo tape directly into Mr. McTaggart's hands.

And as luck would have it, Sly's persistence paid off. Just as Sly was finally beginning to consider leaving the tape with the receptionist, McTaggart walked out of his office on his way to lunch. Dashing after him, Sly intercepted him on the street.

"I'll give it a listen," McTaggart told him after Sly had explained. "But you understand, there's just no way. Not this year. The bands have all been booked."

"But if there's a cancellation?" Sly pressed him.

"Sonny, that just doesn't happen," McTaggart said. "This festival is a big opportunity, as you probably know. Bands just don't cancel out when it's their big chance."

"But you'll listen to the tape?" Sly asked.

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"Sure, sure," McTaggart said. "Call me later, and I'll let you know what I thought. And now, if you'll let me pass, I'm on my way to lunch."

Satisfied that he'd done all he could for the moment, Sly let McTaggart go. The promoter held in his hand the Dreams' hopes and Sly's last slim chance to redeem himself.

Sly called again at ten minutes to five, and the secretary put him right through to McTaggart. "Hey, your tape was terrific!" the promoter said. "Too bad I can't use your band. But next year for sure, okay?"

Sly sighed in frustration. "Sure, Mr. McTaggart," he said. "Thanks." He hung up, feeling totally defeated. He couldn't explain it, but somehow he was sure that when the promoter heard their tape, he'd move heaven and earth to fit the Dreams into the lineup for the festival.

He'd been wrong. Even though he'd wanted this so badly for his band, he hadn't succeeded. In fact, he'd totally blown it. He'd let his friends down—all because of Markie. And after the Dreams had helped him finally get his date with her, too!

How was he going to explain this one away?

* * *

It was six o'clock on Monday when Tony realized that the money he'd earned was missing. In less than a minute, he completely tore apart his room. But it was no use. The money was gone!

His heart in his throat, he thought back to the last time he'd seen it, and that's when he realized the truth. He'd left it on the table at Sharkey's two days ago! How could he have been so stupid?

No way was the money still going to be sitting on that table, he realized. Still, he had to go down there on the off chance that somebody had turned in a hundred forty dollars in cash when they could have walked away with it scot-free.

Tony felt the beads of sweat rolling down his forehead as he ran toward Sharkey's. All the work he'd put into earning that money, all the torture he'd gone through, and it was all going to be for nothing!

He burst into Sharkey's, totally out of breath, and ran over to the table where he'd left the money. Taking the people who were eating there totally by surprise, he shoved their plates around, asked them to stand up, and got under the table looking for any stray bills that might have fallen—all to no avail. His money was gone forever.

"Hey, Wicks!" Sharkey's voice boomed out from behind him. Tony turned to face his former employer, who was wearing a broad grin. "Long time no see, Tony! How's it goin'?"

"Bad, Sharkey," Tony confessed, unable to keep up any kind of front. "I had a big wad of money, and I left it here on Saturday. It was everything I earned at all my other jobs!"

"A hundred forty dollars, right?" Sharkey asked.

"Yeah, man. Hey, how'd you know that?"

"Tiffani showed it to me," Sharkey explained. "She's got your money, Wicks. Don't worry."

"She's—she's got my money?" Tony couldn't believe his good fortune. *Of all the lucky breaks!*

"Listen, Wicks, I've been meaning to talk to you," Sharkey said, looking at the floor.

"Yeah, well, I haven't been around here much," Tony admitted. "How's Stu doing?"

"Uh, that's what I wanted to talk to you about," Sharkey said. "Stu, uh, well, he didn't work out. People kept complaining about him. He was droppin' stuff, gettin' orders mixed up, addin' up checks wrong. I gave him as much of a chance as I could, but finally I decided I had to let him go."

"Hey, I'm sorry to hear that, Sharkey," Tony said sincerely. "Stu's a nice guy. Bad waiter, but a nice guy."

"You got that right," Sharkey agreed. "But the funny thing is, he thanked me! Told me he was about to quit anyway. He said he'd decided to try another line of work."

"Wow!" Tony said, brightening. "But how's he going to do that, Sharkey? Good jobs aren't all that easy to come by, you know."

"Don't worry about Stu," Sharkey assured Tony. "He's already got himself another job, something he's much better suited for. He's gonna be babysittin'. Family named Harrelson."

"H-h-harrelson??" Tony stammered.

"Yup—and they're payin' him eight bucks an hour. Can you believe it?"

"Oh yeah, I believe it," Tony said, nodding his head slowly. "Poor Stu. There isn't enough money in the world to make that job worth it."

"So, Tony, how'd you like your old job back?"

"M-m-my old job?" Tony repeated, not quite believing what he was hearing. "You're kidding me!"

"I realize you've got a lot of other jobs now," Sharkey said. "I should never have let you go. So I'm prepared to double your old salary."

"D-d-double my salary?!" Tony's jaw dropped. "Sharkey, you've got yourself a deal!" And before Sharkey could change his mind, Tony had his hand pumping up and down in a handshake to seal the deal.

Double his old salary! And Tiffani had his hundred forty dollars! It seemed like Tony's luck had changed at last!

• Chapter 12

It had been two days of torture, two days during which Sly had done everything possible to avoid bumping into his friends. And that, of course, was nearly impossible. They all went to school together, had a lot of classes with one another, hung out at Sharkey's together. But if Sly spent any time with the members of California Dreams, sooner or later—probably sooner—they were going to ask him about the arts festival gig.

How could Sly ask his friends to forgive him? It was the ideal opportunity, and he had totally squandered it.

If only he hadn't been so preoccupied with Markie Malone! Sure, he'd succeeded at what he'd really put his mind to, but he should have been putting his mind to something else!

Not that he was sorry to be dating the most gorgeous babe he'd ever seen outside the pages of a magazine. No, no regrets there. But he was going to have to worm out of taking Markie to the arts festival somehow. No way could he take her there and watch all those other dorky bands perform. Not after he'd messed up so royally. It would be too painful.

Now he lay in bed, his homework forgotten for the second straight day, his head pounding. His alarm clock said 8:00 P.M. Leaning over, Sly reached to shut off the bedside light. What was there to stay awake for, anyway?

And that was when the telephone rang. Probably one of the Dreams, Sly figured, calling to find out what had happened to their sure-thing gig. *Maybe I shouldn't answer it, he thought.*

Then again, you never know. Sly sat up in bed and reached for the receiver, hoping against hope. . . .

"Mr. Winkle? McTaggart here. At the arts festival? Remember me?"

Did he remember? He hadn't thought of anyone else in two whole days! "Uh, yes sir," Sly said. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, you remember I said there was no way for your band to get on the list unless somebody canceled?"

"Uh, yes . . ."

"Guess what? I just got a call from Bradley, of Bradley and the Billionaires. Ever heard of them?"

Had he ever heard of them? Bradley and the Billionaires were the Dreams' chief rival for preeminent band at PCHS. The Billionaires had even beaten them out in a battle of the bands two years ago. Of course, the Dreams had gotten their revenge the following year, so things were even.

"Sure, Mr. McTaggart, I've heard of them," Sly told the promoter, his hopes beginning to revive.

"It seems Bradley's come down with a severe case of tonsillitis. He had to have his butler call me to cancel for them! So if your guys are still interested, it looks like I can fit you in after all!"

"If we're still interested? Mr. McTaggart, you can pencil us in there right now!" Sly exulted. "Better yet, put it down in indelible ink! We'll be there!"

Sly hung up, hardly able to believe his good fortune. He'd done it after all! How could he have ever doubted himself? A guy with his kind of ability? It was only a matter of time before things inevitably went his way!

Sly leaped out of bed and got dressed, making sure to look really sharp. Not for Markie this time, but for his friends. He had to tell them right away! And he knew exactly where they'd all be at eight o'clock on a Tuesday night—at Sharkey's, working on their after-dinner shakes!

* * *

Matt, Jake, and Samantha were in their usual places at Sharkey's, being waited on by a very happy Tony,

when Sly pranced in, wearing a mile-wide grin.

"Hey, you guys!" he crowed. "Where've you been for the past couple of days? I've missed you!"

"We were just wondering the same thing about you, Winkle," Jake replied. "We've been where we usually are—school, here, practice at Matt's—but you haven't been anywhere."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "It's like you dropped off the face of the earth!"

"We thought maybe you were avoiding us for some reason or other," Matt suggested, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, like not wanting to tell us we didn't get the gig at the arts festival," Tony added.

"Me? Avoiding you guys?" Sly said, his jaw dropping in feigned shock and dismay. "No way, José!"

"So how come you cut biology class two days in a row?" Matt wondered.

"Working on things, my man," Sly said, draping an arm around his pal's shoulders as he sat down next to him. "And as for the gig—wait a minute, where's Tiffani?"

"She'll be here soon," Matt told him. "She had to go someplace."

"What were you going to tell us, Sly?" Sam asked.

"Hmm?"
"About the gig?" Jake prompted him. "Did we get it or didn't we?"

"We certainly did, mon frère," Sly announced proudly. "Didn't I tell you guys it was in the bag? It just took a little longer than I expected to tie up all the loose ends."

"There must have been a couple hundred of them," Tony said, looking doubtful.

"Hey, Tony," Sly said, noticing his friend's Sharkey's T-shirt for the first time. "Since when are you working here again?"

"Sharkey took me back," Tony told him. "Begged me to work for him at twice my old salary! I guess two weeks of Stu working here was enough to make him appreciate me. And my friends helped out, too."

"I don't get you," Sly said.

"We made Stu see that he wasn't cut out to be a waiter," Jake explained.

"Yeah," Matt confirmed. "But Stu got a better job, anyway. Baby-sitting."

"He'll be making eight dollars an hour," Tony said, casting his eyes upward for a moment. "If he survives, that is."

"Well, you look glad to be back, anyway," Sly said, nodding at Tony appreciatively. "Go get me a shake, huh? In fact, shakes for everybody—let's celebrate!"

"With pleasure," Tony said with a little bow. "I love to serve my customers. As long as they show their appreciation by leaving big tips. You hear me, Sylvester? After all, I'm working my way toward that set of Pearl drums."

The Dreams were about to drink their celebratory shakes when who should walk in but Markie Malone—arm in arm with a six-foot hunk. The guy had long blond hair and muscles bigger than Sly's head!

Seeing Sly and the Dreams sitting there, Markie led her new catch over to introduce him.

"Hi, you guys!" she said, sounding positively thrilled to see them. "This is Jeff Jordan. He and his family have just moved here. He's going to be starting at school tomorrow, and I'm going to show him the ropes! Isn't that the coolest?"

"Hi, Jeff," Matt said, casting a sidelong glance at Sly as he greeted the new arrival.

"Hi," Jake seconded Matt's greeting.

"Hello," Sam added weakly.

"Howdy," Tony pitched in.

"Nice to meet you guys," Jeff Jordan said, flashing them a smile that was so perfect even a dentist couldn't have created it.

"Come on, Jeff," Markie said, tugging him toward an empty table. "I don't know about you, but I'm famished." She gave him a hungry glance and led him away.

Sly stood up quickly and marched over to their table. "What's going on here?" he demanded, glaring at Markie. "I thought you and I were seeing each other!"

"We were," Markie replied flatly.

"Have you forgotten that we're going to the arts festival together this weekend?" Sly asked her.

"Oh, that," Markie said, sighing regretfully. "I'm going to be sick that day. But don't worry—Jeff is going to take good care of me. Aren't you, Jeff?"

She gave the hunk another lean and hungry look, and he gave it right back to her. As far as either one of them was concerned, Sly was no longer even there. He had totally ceased to exist!

"Okay," Sly said, steaming now. "I get the message: I'm being dumped. Is that it? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Brilliant deduction, Sherlock," Markie said, still gazing into Jeff's limpid blue eyes.

Unbelieving, stunned, Sly found himself uncharacteristically speechless. He walked like a zombie back to the Dreams' table and lowered himself slowly into his seat.

"I can't believe it," he breathed, staring into space. "After all I went through, she dumps me, just like that, for the first hunk who comes around!"

"He's a hunk all right," Sam acknowledged, sighing longingly.

"That girl's a crumb, Winkle," Jake said, slapping Sly on the arm consolingly. "She wasn't worth your time, man."

"Hey, Sylvester," Tony told him, "there'll be other babes. You didn't want that chick, anyway."

"Stu said she was a real jerk," Sly remembered, nodding slowly. "I guess he was right, and I was wrong."

"You can say that again," Matt said hotly. "She

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certainly didn't have to go rub your nose in it like that. Even if you did follow her around like a puppy dog."

"Well, you guys," Sly said, bravely lifting his shake and offering a toast. "Here's to us! Babes may come, and babes may go, but good friends are forever!"

"Hear, hear!" Matt said, lifting his glass and clinking Sly's.

"And you know what?" Sly went on. "We've got a lot to celebrate—like our big upcoming gig! Markie Malone's gonna wake up next week to find that she blew her chance to date the manager of the hottest rock group in southern California!"

"Yeah!" Sam agreed, lifting her glass. "To us!" "And to your new drum set," Sly said, turning to face Tony. "You'll get it, sooner or later. Just keep your mind focused on it, man, and you're bound to succeed!"

"I thought you said that didn't apply to me," Tony reminded him.

"I was wrong, Tony," Sly said seriously. "It just takes some people longer than others."

"Mmm," Tony said, nodding. "I just wish I could have had them in time for our big gig this weekend."

At that very moment, Tiffani burst through the front door of the restaurant, wearing a smile from ear to ear. "Guess what, you guys?" she said, coming up to them. "I just had a long talk with Iggy, over at the music store."

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"And?" Jake prompted her.

"Well, you know how he kind of likes me?"

"I'll say," Tony agreed. "First thing he always says is 'How's Tiffani? That's some girl!'"

"Well, anyway," Tiffani went on, "I used a little friendly persuasion. . . ."

"And? And?" Sam asked.

"And he's agreed to take Tony's hundred forty dollars as a down payment on the drum set. And as a special consideration, he's going to let Tony have the drums right away!!"

"Yaahoooo!!" Tony's cry of joy got the attention of everyone in the restaurant. "Look out, world, here I come!"

There were high fives all around, hugs, whoops of joy, and last but not least, a big kiss for Tiffani from Tony. "Let me get you a shake, little lady!" he said, running to get her an extra-thick one.

"There!" Tony said, when he returned with Tiffani's shake and one for himself, too. "Well, you all—we've got us a big gig, I've got my dream set of drums, and we've all got each other. I'd say we've got a lot to celebrate!"

"And I've succeeded in getting rid of Markie Malone," Sly added. "Good riddance is all I have to say. Any girl who would reject a guy like me for a guy with a head full of muscles must be pretty dumb herself!"

"Brother," Tony said, draping an arm around Sly's shoulders, "you said a mouthful."

"It's like I told you guys in the very begin-

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ning," Sly said. "When a person sets his mind to something, there's no stopping him from getting it!"

"Uh, I'd say that little slogan needs some amending," Tony said, raising a hand to object. "I'd put it this way: There's no stopping a person when he wants something bad enough, has a little bit of luck, and a little help from his friends!"

Dreamers and Schemers



It's time for the South Coast Arts Festival. And who's one of the top contenders to play at this prize gig? California Dreams, of course! Sly, manager extraordinaire, is absolutely certain that he can land this one without any problem. So what if every band within a hundred miles is auditioning. To Sly, they're just a little healthy competition. No threat whatsoever.

But then Sly meets Markie Malone, an absolute knockout. All of a sudden, he's having a hard time concentrating on the arts festival. This girl's got him more than just a little distracted.

Can Sly keep his eye on the right prize? Or will he let a beautiful girl come between himself and the Dreams? Find out when you read *Dreamers and Schemers*, the new novel about California Dreams—the hottest band around!

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